The Patience of God

In a world of 20/20 cricket, fast food, fast cars and now fast broadband, patience is a little considered virtue. Yet, the authors of Wisdom and today’s Psalm present us with a God who is ever patient with human failure, slow to anger and rich in mercy. Furthermore, we are told, to be virtuous, one needs to act as God acts, through kindness, gentleness and patience.

Our world is not only fast, it also highly competitive. Of course, competition has its place. Too often, though, competition and the desire for quick results lead to aggressive behaviours. We see this on the sporting field, in the market-place and through the rhetoric of our politicians.
In his parables, Jesus presents us with a set of values at odds with a fast, competitive and aggressive world. We see this in the patient farmer of today’s gospel who waits for the right time to weed out the darnel from the wheat. Likewise, in the parable of the mustard seed and the yeast-parable of the woman making bread, time and patience are required.

Prayer too takes time, patience and perseverance. Just as human friendship takes time to grow and mature, so too our relationship with God does not happen overnight. Often, we find ourselves, in the words of St Paul, unable to choose the right words to pray properly. Yet, as Paul says, the “Holy Spirit expresses our plea in a way that could never be put into words”. In prayer, what’s important are not fancy words but the truth of the heart.

Earlier in the year, floods, cyclones and fires devastated the lives of many Australian families. While such climate tragedies are not new, scientists tell us their frequency and intensity are on the increase. Australians, like many others, respond to such human tragedy with remarkable generosity reminding us there is much more to the human spirit than competition and aggression. In adversity, people learn something of what it is to act as God acts—with mercy and compassion.

This reminds us that prayer is a matter of both words and action. Moreover, as the parable of the sewer teaches, we speak and act in a world where good and evil co-exist. We also know that each of us is touched by good and evil. But the Spirit of truth has been given to us “in our weakness” (Paul) to enable us to grow in faith, hope and love.

If we feel impatient with our world, ourselves and even with God, we should return to the lessons of the mustard seed and leaven. These parables of encouragement point to the presence of God’s kingdom already in our midst. Do not despair with world, church or self: the tiny seed will one day flower; the yeast will become bread.

In our fast world, we need to learn patience, God’s patience. Patience with others is love. Patience with self is hope. Patience with God is faith. Since God is patient with us, let us become patient workers in the vineyard of life.
Let’s face it. We find the story of Jesus’ ascension to heaven rather strange to our ears. As with the resurrection, there is little agreement among New Testament writers regarding the facts, whether it took place in Bethany on the same day as the resurrection (Luke) or some forty days later at Mount Olivet (Acts). Mark merely mentions the ascension occurred. Matthew is entirely silent on the subject. For John and Paul, it is enough to assert that Jesus is at the right hand of the Father. For these evangelists, the ascension is a short-hand way of proclaiming their faith in the resurrected Jesus’ return to God.

Ascension-talk can be traced back to Jesus’ own words. To the Jews he says: "What if you shall then see the Son of Man ascend to where He was before?" [Jn 6:62]. To Mary Magdalene: "Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet returned to the Father. Go instead to my brothers and tell them, 'I am returning to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.' " [Jn 20: 17]. The ascension, wherever and
however it took place, marks the fulfilment of Jesus’ earthly mission. The Christmas story—God taking on human form—comes full circle: Jesus, crucified and risen, now returns to the Father.

“So, why are you Galileans standing around looking into the sky?” Jesus has disappeared from your sight, yes, but now the Holy Spirit will come upon you. Your mission is to continue the work that Jesus began through the power of the Spirit. The full meaning of the ascension is captured in today’s Gospel [Matthew]. Following the resurrection, Jesus meets ‘the eleven’ at a pre-arranged mountain and commissions them to ‘make disciples of all nations’.

The ascension marks the disappearance and reappearance of God’s gracious presence in our world. Disappearance: God is no longer seen in the human face of Jesus, neither in his earthly ministry nor in post-resurrection appearances. That special time of God’s communication is over. Reappearance: the mission of Jesus is continued in the lives of his disciples. To paraphrase Gerard Manley Hopkins: ‘Christ plays in ten thousand places, lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his, to the Father, through the features of human faces’ [God’s Grandeur].

Christians are called to be visible if bruised faces of Christ in the world. Their call is twofold: to be converted to Christ’s way of compassionate, vulnerable love; to be instruments of conversion for others. In light of the Great Commission concluding Matthew’s Gospel, we need to ask if today’s wounded church can be an effective sign of Christ in our world?

Yes, because Christ promises through the gift of the Spirit to be with his church until the end of time, despite all its weaknesses. Today, the church is called to witness to the vulnerable Christ who enters into dialogue with disciples and strangers, Jews and Samaritans, saints and sinners. The Church’s mission is both to proclaim Christ to others and to learn of the presence of the hidden Christ in all the world’s cultures and traditions.
Sermon on the Mount

In most movies of Jesus preaching his famous “Beatitudes”, he is standing up. But Matthew tells us he went up the hill and “sat down”. If you have ever had the opportunity to meet Fijian chiefs in their villages or Indian gurus in their ashrams, you will have noticed when important things are to be said everyone, including the speaker, sits in a circle on the ground. In this way, an atmosphere of intimacy between speaker and listeners is established. Such was the occasion of Jesus’ sermon on the hill.

Some of those who gathered around Jesus had experienced his healing powers—or witnessed these events. Others had simply heard the rumours and were intrigued to find out what kind of a person Jesus was. Some were already convinced he was a prophet sent by God: they called themselves disciples. Others were more sceptical. In any
case, this preacher from Nazareth had become a celebrity. What will he have to say today?

His message is unnerving in its simplicity and outrageous in its claims. Since when has poverty of any kind been a blessing? How could gentleness be a business strategy for inheriting the earth? Suffer and mourn as you will, but experience tells us broken lives and hearts are rarely mended. As for doing justice, making peace and showing mercy, these may be fine ideals, but they don’t put bread on the table, challenge society’s bullies or do much to improve our earthly lot. And yet?

The words of Jesus linger in the minds of his hearers no less today than when they were first spoken. They seem to go the heart of what it is to live an authentic life. If we make wealth our goal, we are soon consumed by greed. If power is our thing, we trample on others to achieve it. If we fail to stand up against corruption, we are already compromised. If we are deaf to the cries of the poor and downtrodden, we have lost our humanity. Where does this leave us?

Jesus’ unsurpassable vision of human integrity is not a secular ethic. His Beatitudes are so inspiring, and confronting, because they are based on his knowledge, love and experience of God. He frequently calls this the reign of God or kingdom of heaven which is already here among you. It is not like the earthly kingdoms of wealth and power. The divine presence is everywhere, but only the “pure in heart”—those who know their own nothingness—have hearts free enough to encounter this living God.

Mary, the mother of Jesus, knew this. Her Magnificat prayer, like the Sermon on the Mount, celebrates the “divine reversal”: God’s mercy is present where we least expect upturning kingdoms of selfishness and corruption, proclaiming liberty to captives, bringing joy to broken and unfulfilled lives. This is the image of the self-emptying love of Christ on Calvary who shows us the way to live by pouring out our lives for others. It is to the little ones the kingdom of God belongs.
Beware of prophets with much to say
you don’t want to hear on judgment day.
They call your bluff and cause you fear:
the day of judgment is quite near.

John the Baptist was such a one
Man of the desert and midday sun.
He challenges people: repent of your sin
if salvation is something you choose to win.

You people, he said, are vipers and snakes
and, for good measure, hypocrites, fakes.
You might keep the law in a half-hearted way
but the law of love so quick to betray.

To change the world, first look at yourselves,
straighten your paths to where the Lord dwells.
Don’t be fooled by power or greed:
open your hearts, acknowledge your need.
Don’t look to me, I’m not the one, 
whose coming is sure as the noonday sun 
To baptise you all with Spirit and fire 
and lead you beyond this earthly mire.

The time of waiting is near the end 
the kingdom of heaven is close at hand. 
God’s justice will flourish for all to see 
in Christ alone is the victory.

John’s message so strange to our human ears 
repent and believe – raising our fears. 
Abraham’s children though we may be, 
without repentance, Christ we won’t see.

Not the message we wanted to hear 
preparing for Christmas this time of year. 
Is Christ’s coming promise or curse? 
The answer is clear in Isaiah’s verse.

The wolf and lamb together will lie 
with goanna and kangaroo nearby. 
Every tribe and people and nation will be 
places of peace and liberty.

Things will not change by human desire 
they’re gifts of the Spirit from on high. 
This is the prayer of our advent song: 
Christ will show us where we went wrong

And lead us all to new ways of life 
where love and justice end all strife. 
These words of prophets strike a chord 
when we trust our heavenly Lord.

Advent time’s a good place to start 
admitting our need for this change of heart. 
As John and Isaiah both attest: 
Jesus is coming to be our guest.
In the Footsteps of Zacchaeus?

Zacchaeus was not popular among his fellow Jews around Jericho. After all, he worked for the occupying Roman forces as a tax-collector. For this, most Jews considered him a traitor. We also hear that Zacchaeus was a wealthy man. Obviously he gained his wealth by pocketing some of the money he took in taxes. This also means he must have been shrewd in his dealings with the Romans who, no doubt, also considered him a scumbag. Traitors are respected neither by their own people nor by those for whom they work.
Zacchaeus had another problem: he was very short. According to Luke, this is why he climbed the scyamore tree to “catch a glimpse of Jesus” who was thronged by a large crowd. Maybe there were other reasons, not least the hostile reception he could expect from his fellow-Jews. But Luke hints at another reason, namely, Zacchaeus’ motivation: “He was anxious to see what kind of man Jesus was”. Note, Zacchaeus is not (yet) converted; he has no doubt heard about this prophet from Nazareth. Perhaps, like many, he was just curious.

As the story unfolds, it is not Zacchaeus, but Jesus, who takes the initiative: “Zacchaeus, come down . . . I must stay at your house today”. What an embarrassment both for Zacchaeus and for the crowd. The latter, we are told, complained when they saw what was happening, saying “he has gone to stay at a sinner’s house”. As for Zacchaeus, we have this remarkable promise to give half his money to the poor and pay back anyone he has cheated fourfold.

What we are not told is what happened afterwards. Did Zacchaeus keep to his word? Did he become a disciple of Jesus? Did he give up his tax-collecting job? We are told none of this. Nonetheless, in Luke’s account, Jesus announces: “Today salvation has come to this house”. Not tomorrow, but now, Jesus calls each of us by name—not because we are especially good but because, in Jesus’ own words, “the Son of Man has come to seek out and save what was lost”.

Could it also be that Jesus was using the occasion to challenge the prejudices of those who thought of themselves as good and upright Jews? There were other occasions when Jesus eats with “tax-collectors and sinners”. This was quite a shock to his followers who considered such behaviour improper. The lesson: the world is not divided between the good people in church and the bad people outside it since, as Jesus said on another occasion, “no-one is good but God alone”.

The image of Zacchaeus hopping up a tree to get a glimpse of Jesus should remind us of those many people who find belief in God or goodness too difficult, too painful, to admit. Yet, they remain curious. They will claim they are not religious; they will not be ‘church people’. We may call them ‘anonymous believers’ whose hearts have been broken by too many negative experiences. It is especially to these the message of the Gospel is directed. God is ever patient.
The Marian Church

Today we honour Mary’s role in the history of salvation. She bore the Messiah and so, among all women, she is most blessed. Mother of God and our mother too, Mary is model and image of the church, true believer and first disciple, who fully receives God’s Word, ponders it in her heart and lives it with faithfulness.

The role of Mary is marked throughout Christian history with shrines, processions and statues. But let us not forget, in the words of Pope Paul VI, she is “truly our sister, who as a poor and humble woman fully shared our lot”.

Mary is one of us on earth before she is assumed body and soul into heaven. In her earthly life, she shows us the way to live the Gospel; in her heavenly life she prays with and for us, members of the body of her Son, that we too may live by the Word of God.

Let us strive, then, to live the Gospel after the manner of Mary, to be the Marian people of God. Let our church be like Mary, searching after
Jesus Christ, a servant church, without power or privilege, concerned only that Christ and his kingdom are proclaimed.

This Marian Church follows Mary to the mountains and by-ways to encounter life. When things appear sterile, she is on the watch for what is coming to birth, for possibilities, for the life that beats in things. She gives birth to the Word.

The Marian Church experiences the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of all people, regardless of race or creed. She goes in search of the lost and abandoned, foreigners, refugees, beggars, lepers, the sick and imprisoned. She is the voice of hope.

The Marian church lives in Nazareth with simplicity. She chats with people in the market place; she weeps and rejoices with them. She knows the art of dialogue: she does not preach; she listens.

The Marian church stands at the foot of the Cross in prayerful silence. She stands beside those who are crushed by the forces of life, knowing God is on the side of the little and forgotten ones of history.

The Marian church lets in the winds of Pentecost. She quietly proclaims her message that God’s kingdom of justice, love and peace is upon us. She leaves the Spirit room to breath where it will.

The Marian church sings Mary’s Magnificat, a hymn of praise and thanksgiving, midst the tragedies of our world. With humility and courage, she speaks out against greed and exploitation. She sings of God’s justice and mercy.

The Marian church knows God’s motherly heart and so stands with the peasant woman, the dying soldier, the orphaned child. She reminds us that God is to be found here, in this place, among these people—however broken, bruised or wounded.

Rather than bemoan the fate and woes of the world, the Marian church is in wonder at the beauty of creation and in the human heart, knowing that God is present where we least expect—in our earthly life and in the world to come.
God a Question not an Answer!

The big religious question is often posed as “Does God exist?” Those who say “no” are called atheists; those who say “yes”, theists; those who don’t know, agnostics. However, for the religious believer, the question is rather different. It begins with the experience of mystery ... the felt knowledge there is something more powerful, more real, more true to life than human thought.

God is not an answer to a question so much as an unsettling question to us: “Do we exist as we should?” For most of us, the answer is mixed. Yes, we try to live good lives but so often find ourselves in situations of compromise. Not only do we fail to live the lives we should; we find ourselves caught up in negative things like jealousy, greed and cynicism. Deep down, we all know our lives are less than they should be.

Trinity Sunday is not so much a question about God’s existence as a question about our existence. Do we hear the music of life or
encounter its source? Or do we float on the surface of life ‘midst boundless activity forgetting the need for prayer and silence? If so, we will never really experience the beauty of creation, the depth of human friendship or the presence of the Spirit in our lives. Then life becomes a series of problems to be solved rather than a mystery to be lived.

God is Holy Mystery. More than this, “God is love, and those who live in love, live in God, and God lives in them” (1 John 4: 16). In other words, our knowledge of God is not the result of human logic, but the experience of the mystery of love. For the Christian, this love is perfectly realised in Jesus Christ, the Word of God. But how is the memory and presence of Jesus kept alive for us today?

As Jesus himself tells us, the “Spirit of truth” will lead us to the Father. This is why Christians of all ages have prayed “in the name of the Father, the Son and Holy Spirit”. The Father’s love for the world is poured out through Word and Spirit ... creating, reconciling, healing, nurturing the universe and every living creature.

This means that God is not some distant reality removed from the plight of our earthly existence. Rather, as St. Paul told the people of Athens (in words now etched on the monument overlooking the Aeropagus): “In God we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17: 28). God is not some sterile monad or one-time creator ... but a communion of persons intimately involved in the processes of the world. This God is closer to us than we are to ourselves.

The Trinity then is the way Christians experience and understand the God-challenge. Not our question of God, but God’s question of us. Do we allow ourselves to be led into the mystery of life with its demands of justice, integrity and love? If we can say ‘yes’ to that, we are alive to the Wisdom, Word and Spirit of God in our ‘midst.
There is something about Jesus’ Parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke’s Gospel 15:11-13) that touches the hearts and imaginations of most listeners. Perhaps this is because we can identify with all the major players: the young, rebellious son who leaves home, family and country to establish his independence; the all-forgiving love and compassion of the father who reaches out to be reconciled to his returning son; and the jealous elder brother who has stays home, keeps the rules, works the farm, and now feels overlooked and filled with anger at the special treatment afforded his recalcitrant brother.
Indeed, there is something disturbing in the way Jesus tells this story. Surely the elder son is right to think the biggest feast should be given in his honour, since he has been the faithful son. Surely, too, you’d think the father might be more questioning of the younger son’s whereabouts before welcoming him home in such extravagant fashion. Moreover, we find ourselves asking why the father gave in so easily to the younger son’s demands to divide the family property and race off with the cash in the first place? When we learn the rebel son “squandered his money on a life of debauchery . . . he and his women” (vv. 13, 30), we sense righteousness and justice are definitely on the side of the elder brother.

However, as important as righteousness and justice are, they lack something more significant. Let us take the story of Chris, a teenager, who leaves school against her parents’ wishes. Family arguments abound; words like “I hate you” fly around. Chris leaves home taking the family jewellery; she turns to prostitution and drugs as a way to survive on the streets. Then she remembers her life as a young girl; she wonders about her parents. Could they possibly still love her? Could she go back to them after all the grief she has caused?

Chris returns home with tattoos and nose-ring. If her parents truly love her, do you think they will begin by questioning her appearance, choice to live on the streets, use of drugs and life of prostitution? No, their first move will be to welcome her with hugs and kisses, to celebrate the return of the daughter who “was dead and has come back to life; was lost and is found” (v. 32). Love, mercy and forgiveness are the hallmarks of all genuine family relationships.

In this same story, the elder ‘faithful’ daughter, Judith, has always followed her parents’ wishes. She finds herself inclined to say some nasty things to Chris. But then she remembers the story Jesus told about the Prodigal Son; she recalls her religion teacher saying something like: “mercy is more profound than justice”. Unlike the elder brother, she overcomes her initial feelings of resentment and joins in the celebrations—after all, her lost sister has returned.

Similarly, God’s all-forgiving love knows no bounds to those who seek the Lord with an open-hearted spirit—no matter what troubles them, what relationships they have destroyed, what sins they have committed.
“How can we sing the song of the Lord on alien soil?” (Ps.137). These words connect us to Jesus’ own birth as a refugee. The paranoid Herod, ever fearful of losing his power, makes up his mind to find and kill the infant Messiah. According to Matthew, Joseph and Mary outwit these plans by travelling from their home in Nazareth to Egypt, before returning to Bethlehem in Judea. Even here they are treated as outcasts with the local inn-keeper refusing them entry. The result is the birth of Jesus in a stable surrounded by donkeys.
Yet, as with every human birth, there is normally someone present to celebrate the event. In Jesus’ case, we are told of the visit of shepherds (Luke) and wise kings of the East (Matthew). Other stories tell of the singing of angels. The pain, anguish and fear experienced by Mary and Joseph are now replaced by ecstatic joy in the birth of their child who is to be named “Jesus”. Great things are expected of him.

Jesus has a normal Jewish upbringing. Mary and Joseph take him to the synagogue. On occasion they make the trip to Jerusalem, centre of Jewish life. When he is twelve, Jesus presents himself as a child prodigy by debating with elders in the temple. Most likely, when reciting the Scriptures to them, he does this by heart. There is little evidence Jesus could read or write. Apart from this one story, we know little of Jesus’ early life except he takes on Joseph’s trade as a carpenter.

There is a sense in which Jesus remains a foreigner among his own people. This becomes evident at the start of his public ministry when he speaks up for the poor and oppressed of Israel. After all, is this not the central message of the prophets before him? Unlike Herod and other worldly rulers, Jesus is not given to power politics or violence. He has one truth to speak, one message to bring: God’s kingdom of justice and peace will reign on earth. Is he a rebel? A fanatic? Certainly, he refuses to accept the world as it is. Moreover, people begin to listen to him, to become followers. This all suggests trouble.

So they move to get rid of him. The little child, whose birth today we celebrate, is finally nailed to a cross to die in the most abject circumstances. This time there are no shepherds, angels or wise kings from the east; even Jesus’ own disciples desert him. But God’s promises in the birth of the Saviour will not be thwarted. Jesus is raised from the dead and God’s Spirit, present at Jesus’ own conception and birth, brings the Church to birth as a sign of God’s salvation.

We do well to recall it is Christ, not the Church, who is Saviour of the world. The Church is the privileged community keeping the memory alive of the wondrous things God has done in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. We are able to sing the song of the Lord on alien soil because of the birth of the Saviour. This is the day when we have every reason to sing with the angels.
Desire and Suffering

To be human is to experience desire and ambition. To know a person’s deep desires is to see into that person’s soul. Desire for good, such as world peace or the end of global warming, is a positive urge of the human spirit. Other desires that focus on personal happiness and success can also be positive. However, they may also become caught up with the ‘dark side’ of the human spirit leading to jealousy, blind ambition and ruthless disregard for others.

Throughout the drama of human life, desire and suffering are closely linked. This is evident, for example, in the works of Shakespeare: one thinks of the innocent, youthful desires of Romeo and Juliet, the dark and treacherous desires of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth, or the obsessive desires of King Richard III. In different ways, these desires all lead to tragic suffering.

The connection between suffering and desire is also a key insight of the Buddha who taught that all suffering is caused by human desire and that happiness or enlightenment consists in the elimination of all
desires. How does this compare with the approach of our own Christian Scriptures?

The long history of Israel is one of suffering at the hands of external enemies and through internal divisions. Jesus’ life-story is also one in which his efforts to bring about God’s kingdom of justice and peace are thwarted by negative forces. Even Jesus’ own disciples, especially in Mark’s Gospel, seem blind to his real mission and message.

Why are Jesus’ disciples so dim-witted? In a word, they are so caught up with their petty desires and ambition for power and glory, they are unable to see Jesus for who he really is or to hear what he truly asks. They want to overcome suffering (as we all do); but they think the way to do this is in the worldly way of grabbing power, status and authority.

Jesus’ response is to challenge their preconceptions: “Anyone who is to be great among you must be your servant; anyone who wants to be first among you must be your slave.” Suffering is integral to our human lives. In this sense, compared to the Buddha, Jesus is more radical by insisting his followers embrace suffering as he does: “Can you drink the cup that I must drink?”

Jesus is not in any way glorifying suffering for its own sake. But he offers a way for us to place suffering in its proper context. The message is foreshadowed by the prophet Isaiah who links the positive acceptance of suffering with liberation from sin and the practice of justice. Acting for God’s kingdom means putting one’s life on the line—and even, as in Jesus’ case, giving one’s “life as a ransom for many”.

There is another form of suffering Jesus shares with us because, like us, he experiences human weakness—though, the writer is careful to add, “he is without sin” (Hebrews). Sin is the ultimate cause of human suffering often expressed in our wayward human desires. Jesus shows us the way to purify such desires through a life of servanthood.
Jeremiah is known as the reluctant prophet. Timid by nature and suffering a speech defect, he found it hard to believe God was calling him to be spokesperson for his people. Yet, it is through the lips of Jeremiah we learn something of the true nature of God as universal shepherd. Today’s Psalm also describes God as the ideal ruler and shepherd guiding his people, protecting them from evil and feeding them a banquet.

All this is a far cry from the real world of terror, violence and division. This is also a world in which leaders of peoples and nations too often act like jealous warlords rather than caring shepherds. God’s promise through Jeremiah is to raise up leaders of honesty and integrity who will shepherd their flock. Here there will be no more terror or division.

Is this just some kind of utopian dream? In Ephesians, the hard-headed Paul recognises divisions between people are deeply ingrained
in human hearts. Yet, he also knows these racial, cultural, religious and human barriers have been destroyed by Christ who “in his own person killed the hostility”. According to John, Jesus Christ is the Good Shepherd who died to unite all the scattered people of God (Jn 10:16; 11:52).

Mark’s Gospel shows that Jesus saw his own earthly ministry in terms of shepherding. He responds to the crowds with compassion because he sees “they were like sheep without a shepherd”. And, like the shepherd in the Psalm, Jesus invites the apostles to “rest for a while” to revive their drooping spirits.

Something of the biblical shepherd image is lost to contemporary ears. In Australia, where sheep stations carry thousands of sheep, we have graziers and pastoralists rather than shepherds. This is far removed from images of biblical shepherds who tend their small flocks and know each sheep by name (Jn 10:3). Since groups of shepherds worked together, it was important that shepherds knew their own sheep and their sheep knew them (Jn 10:14).

This intimate relationship between sheep and shepherd needed to be established at an early stage. Consequently, when Isaiah pictures God as a shepherd who “gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart” (40:11), he is reflecting on normal shepherding practice in biblical, mid-Eastern times.

The good shepherd not only cares for his sheep, he leads them out to more restful waters and greener pastures (Psalm). If necessary, he leaves the ninety-nine and goes in search of the one who is lost (Mt 18:12). Jesus, the Good Shepherd, responds to people’s needs through his ministry of teaching and healing. God, the universal shepherd, is nowhere better depicted than in the story of the Prodigal Son (Lk 15: 11ff.) as the ever-loving and forgiving Father awaiting to celebrate his son’s return with a banquet.

The banquet is a common image throughout the Scriptures including today’s Psalm. The Eucharist re-enacts Jesus’ final banquet with his disciples. Each time we celebrate the Eucharist, we place ourselves at one with Jesus the Good Shepherd and through him with God the universal shepherd. Christians are called to be shepherds.
Passion Sunday

In a world which focuses on success and celebrity, Christians gather in Holy Week to hear the story of the suffering and death of Christ, symbol of all victims of human history. True, next Sunday we celebrate his victory over death in the resurrection. Yet, for the next seven days, our gaze is on the suffering and crucified One, the truly innocent victim.

Jesus is neither the first nor last victim of human cruelty. In truth, our world is one in which gulags, death camps, terrorism and other forms of wanton violence destroy people’s lives. It often seems we live under the ‘reign of evil’ rather than the ‘reign of God’. This is precisely why the Church asks us to look evil in the eye by focusing on the violence and death of the sinless One.

The story of Jesus’ passion is foreshadowed in the abused figures of the ‘suffering servant’ (Isaiah) and the ‘righteous sufferer’ (Psalm). As a faithful Jew, Jesus was aware of this tradition. He chooses the first words of today’s psalm—“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”—to be the final, terrible words he utters from the cross. Dying, he was mocked and ridiculed by the marauding mob.

This tragic scenario of victimhood is voiced by Gloucester in Shakespeare’s King Lear: “As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods; they kill us for their sport”. At first sight, this may appear to be the
message of today’s readings: even the Son of God is defeated by evil forces. Does not Mark’s Gospel portray Jesus the innocent victim dying senselessly and in despair?

In a word, no! There are three parts in Mark’s passion story. In the first, Jesus continues the initiative of his public ministry by: preparing his disciples for what is to come; commending the woman who anoints him; warning of Judas’ betrayal and Peter’s denials; and declaring his blood will be “poured out for many”.

The second part begins with Jesus’ struggle in the garden of Gethsemane. Like the ‘suffering servant’ he is almost silent in the face of his false accusers. Seeking comfort from the disciples, he finds them asleep. Then, following Pilate’s lack of nerve, Jesus is cynically exchanged for Barabbas and sent to a death reserved for rebels and slaves.

In the third part, Jesus’ victory over his enemies comes to light with the tearing of the temple veil and the pagan centurion’s declaration of Jesus as “Son of God”. This was anticipated by the ‘suffering servant’ who trusted the Lord would come to his help. Clearly, Jesus’ passion story is not yet finished.

St Irenaeus says “only what is assumed is redeemed”. Without God being one with us in Christ Jesus, we could not hope to become one with God. Paul (Philippians) shows the depths of Christ’s identification with humanity through his humble acceptance of suffering and violent death.

“But God raised him on high”. God alone is the answer to human suffering and victimhood. Christ’s disciples come to know this by laying their own lives on the line, knowing death itself cannot defeat us.