Advent, the season of hope, is also a time of challenge: how effective are we, as Christians, in living and proclaiming the Gospel? Such challenge is central to the message of Israel’s prophets, including John the Baptist and Jesus himself. Isaiah tells us the Word of God is like “a rod that strikes the ruthless”; the Baptist refers to some of the Pharisees and Sadducees as “a brood of vipers”; Jesus confronts both Pharisees and his own disciples for their blindness to the ways of God.

Today the church and all Christians are challenged to live more authentic lives. More than this, we are being asked to become ‘evangelisers’, people who announce the “good news” of God’s reign for the world. The word ‘evangelisation’ has taken on increased importance in the messages of all four recent popes and, since John
Paul II, we find ourselves invited to take part in what is called ‘the new evangelisation’.

What then is this “new evangelisation”? First, we need to be clear that the church’s call to evangelise is something at the heart of its life, mission and identity. This has been true through all times and ages. However, there are ‘new’ challenges which spring from a fast-changing world and a church confronted by its own weaknesses. We live at a time when many once-Christian societies are becoming post-Christian—or even anti-Christian. We also live at a time when the failure of Christians, including priests and ministers, is highlighted in print and media.

So, as Pope Paul VI said over thirty years ago, the first task of the church is to “be evangelised herself”. More recently, Pope Francis made a similar plea when he stated that being a Christian is not a matter of belonging to a club. Moreover, he calls on the church to be true to its mission of “evangelising to the ends of the world” rather than being “a sick church turned in on itself”.

The “new evangelisation”, then, requires two important steps. The first is the Advent challenge of the Baptist: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is close at hand”. We must listen to the Word and Spirit of God so that, like the church of Pentecost, our own hearts will be set on fire with God’s love and mercy.

Second, we must witness to and proclaim Jesus Christ to the world in such a way that he is accepted and received. For Pope Francis this requires a new approach and attitude. We do not effectively preach the Gospel in the manner of conquering soldiers on the battlefield. Rather, we engage with others in a spirit of humility. Indeed, the Christian must “listen to everyone” and “build bridges, not walls!”

In the words of Australian poet Kenneth Crotty: ‘Jesus has to be born afresh in every age”. In this sense, evangelisation is always new. Today, that task has particular urgency in light of the challenges facing our church and world. So, let us be attentive to the birth of Christ in our own lives—and for the life of the world.
True Worship of God

As church-people, we may think we know what it means to worship God. After all, we go to church, say some prayers, pay our dues, and try to live a decent life. Indeed, all this is well and good. But God asks something more of us. Do we think the good things we do in life arise from our own virtue? Do we find ourselves somewhat judgmental and intolerant of those who don’t quite live up to our standards?

We are confronted with these kinds of questions by Jesus’ story of the publican (or tax collector) and the Pharisee. A modern-day version of this story might contrast a good church-going Catholic lawyer with a less than scrupulous property developer. Now one day the Catholic lawyer decides to make an extra visit to the church to praise and thank God for all the good things he does in life (including all that pro bono work he does for the church). But his prayer drifts especially when, to his surprise, he sees the low-life property developer standing at the back of the church. He especially thanks God he is not like that!
What we first note about our property developer is that he hardly dares enter the church and, when he does, keeps his eyes downcast. Being neither fancy with words nor knowing how to pray, all he is says is (repeatedly): “God forgive me”. Jesus praises the property developer while suggesting our lawyer was not really worshipping—or “at rights with”—God.

In the original parable, Jesus finishes with the saying: ‘those who exalt themselves will be humbled; but those who humble themselves will be exalted’. Humility in prayer, linked to God’s ‘option for the poor’, is also a central feature in today’s other readings: the Lord hears the cry of the poor, is close to the broken-hearted, answers the prayer of orphans, widows and victims of injustice, and rescues those in distress. Indeed, it is ‘the humble person’s prayer that pierces the clouds’; and ‘the humble shall hear and be glad’.

What is interesting in the life of Jesus is that he not only told stories that confronted people’s attitudes and beliefs. He acted those stories out by befriending the poor, healing the disabled, and ‘eating with tax collectors and sinners’. However, unlike our ‘self-referential’ lawyer friend, Jesus’ ministry does not focus on himself, the good he does or the choices he makes, but on the love and mercy of an all-forgiving God. The property developer in our story reaches a similar point in his own life whereby his entire focus becomes God-centred.

Pope Francis is saying something similar about the kind of church he wants us—and understands God calls us—to be. Rather than a ‘self-referential church’ closed up on itself, the Pope calls us to be a church of the poor, a church that reaches out to touch all people, especially those on the margins of life, with the message of God’s compassionate presence. For this to occur, the church needs to become less like our lawyer, and more like our property developer!
“And With Your Spirit”?

In recent English translations of the Liturgy, when the priest says “The Lord be with you” or “Peace be with you,” we are now instructed to respond “And with your spirit” (instead of “And also with you”). Most people have made the change without too much hassle—and most likely without too much understanding. Among those who have
thought about it, some think it an awkward English expression even if it is a more direct translation of the Latin "et cum spiritu tuo" (something which altar boys of the 1960s will remember). Pentecost Sunday, which is the celebration of the Holy Spirit, is a good opportunity to reflect on the positive aspects of this change from “you” to “your spirit.”

When somebody says to us “I hope you are well”, we might respond “And you too.” Both greeting and response can be understood as blessings for those who recognise health and wellbeing as gifts of God’s Spirit. Equally, though, wishing someone good health does not necessarily relate to God at all. When the priest says “The Lord be with you,” this is a direct calling on the Lord’s blessings. By responding “And with your spirit” we are explicitly praying for spiritual gifts for the priest who celebrates the Eucharist. It is also a reminder that the Eucharistic celebration always depends on the presence and power of the Holy Spirit for the re-enactment of Christ’s sacrifice.

The Eucharist is the source and summit of the Church’s life. In his fourth century reflection on the priest and the Eucharist, St John Chrysostom stated: “If the Holy Spirit were not in this your common father and teacher, you would not, just now, . . . have cried out with one accord, ‘And with your spirit.’” Further commenting on these words Chrysostom adds: “By this cry, you are reminded that he who stands at the altar does nothing; but that the grace of the Holy Spirit is present and, descending on all, accomplishes this mysterious sacrifice. We indeed see a man, but it is God who acts through him. Nothing human takes place at this holy altar.”

The Holy Spirit is not only present at the altar of the Eucharist, but is the all-pervasive presence of God at work in creation and history. Many will have seen the classic Star War movies in which our young hero, Luke Skywalker, finds himself confronted by the evil Lord, Darth Vedar. Initially impulsive, raw and relying too much on his own efforts, Luke turns to the power of “the Force” through whom evil is averted, victory gained. This mythological story reminds us that the world is indeed at the behest of both good and evil forces that may overtake our lives. However, the Holy Spirit is not an impersonal force in the universe, but God’s own Spirit who teaches, guides and animates every living thing with divine grace and truth. This is also the Spirit of Jesus Christ reflected in Paul’s words of greeting: “The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit” (Phil 4:23).
It’s good to belong to a tribe, group, family or community. We feel a sense of belonging: these are my brothers, sisters, friends or associates. We share the same values, like the same music, speak the same language, enjoy the same jokes. We might play in the same team, go to the same movies, read the same books, holiday together. Occasionally there will be sibling rivalry, maybe family feuds, but we know our identities are formed and affirmed in our relationships with like-minded people.

But what is our attitude to the outsider? Do we find ourselves rejecting others because they don’t belong to our clan? Are we welcoming or intolerant of the stranger? Both Moses and Jesus found themselves
dealing with one-eyed disciples. John tries to stop a man performing miracles in Jesus’ name. Why? “He was not one of us”! Joshua was similarly dismissive of two little-known prophets, Eldad and Medad, who strayed into the camp. Joshua complains to Moses they do not belong to our circle.

Moses hits the nail on the head by asking Joshua if he is jealous. Jesus could have said the same to John and his mates. What Jesus does say may be more revealing: “Anyone who is not against us is for us”. In both cases, Joshua and John felt they had a certain ownership of Moses and Jesus respectively: Joshua had been with Moses since his youth; John was among the special disciples of the Lord. They were both good men who were rightly proud of their special status which they wanted to guard. Strangers, foreigners and outsiders threatened their identities.

There’s an apocryphal story of Jesus attending a football match: Protestant Punchers versus Catholic Crusaders. The Punchers scored first and Jesus cheered. Then the Crusaders scored and Jesus cheered again. This confused his mates so they asked him: “Which side are you on?” Jesus replied: “Me? I’m on everyone’s side!” Later he told them: “God does not have favourites!”

How easy it is to divide the world into us versus them. We are all familiar with stories of religious bigotry, ethnic hatred and class warfare. Too often, people guard their place in the world by rejecting the ‘other’ as humanly inferior, morally deficient or simply “not one of us.” Whether white or black, rich or poor, Christian or Muslim, Jew or Gentile, male or female, gay or straight, saint or sinner, we are all chosen and blessed by God. Equally, we will be judged for our misguided prejudices: “Do not devise evil in your hearts against others” (Zechariah 7:10).

On this, Catholic teaching is quite clear: “The Church reproves as foreign to the mind of Christ any discrimination against others on account of race, colour, condition of life, or religion” (Vatican II’s Nostra Aetate). If this appears obvious, the Council goes further by insisting we enter into dialogue with other traditions to learn from them the ways in which a generous God has distributed gifts among all peoples and nations. As Moses and Jesus taught, there are no outsiders. Let us then embrace the stranger.
Mary at the Birth

Christian art privileges three pivotal scenes to mark the beginnings of Christian faith: the nativity, crucifixion and Pentecost. In all three scenes, Mary the mother of Jesus plays a key role in the unfolding drama.

1. Nativity: Mary, Joseph and the baby lying in a manger. In Luke’s account (2:16-21), they are visited by shepherds who have heard voices of angels telling them what to expect. Indeed, "it was exactly as they had been told". Unlike the Magi in Matthew, Luke’s shepherds do not worship the child; they simply recount their story and return to their places “glorifying and praising God”. There is music on the lips and in the hearts of these simple men who experience God’s grace and beauty in the birth of this Palestinian-Jewish child.
Had not others also heard? If so, why did they not make the trip to Bethlehem? Perhaps their curiosity was not as strong as their fear of Herod. This is in contrast to the courage of the shepherds who make the journey. Even stronger is the contrast with the perilous journey of Mary and Joseph. We recall Mary’s earlier words at the Annunciation: “Be it done to me according to your word”. She is not paralyzed by fear nor forgetful of the angel’s message.

Rather, Mary “treasures all these things and ponders them in her heart”. Without understanding what is being asked of her, Mary’s ‘yes’ to the Holy Spirit is wholehearted. She proceeds with Joseph to follow Jewish custom by circumcising the child—and naming him ‘Jesus’ as the angel had instructed. In Luke’s gospel, Mary is first among those praised for hearing God’s word and putting it into practice. She is true believer and first disciple.

2. Crucifixion: Mary stands at the foot of the cross of her tortured and crucified Son (Jn 19:25-27). In this stark scene, Mary’s fidelity to the Word of God, and to her own word, is put to full test. Again, her courage is contrasted to that of the absent apostles. She is then appointed by Jesus to be ‘mother’ to the ‘beloved disciple’, symbol of all those brought to life through Jesus’ death. Now, to be a disciple of Jesus also means to make a place for Mary in our hearts and homes.

3. Pentecost: Mary in the midst of the apostles, women and other disciples as the Holy Spirit descends (Acts 1-2). Mary’s earlier role in the birth of Jesus is shared with Joseph; her role in bringing the church to birth is shared with the apostles. In both cases, she is empowered by the Holy Spirit. In Acts, Mary is presented as a model of persevering prayer joined in oneness of mind and heart with Jesus’ disciples. In Christian tradition, this woman of Pentecost will be acclaimed ‘queen of apostles’ as well as ‘mother’ and ‘image’ of the church.

In these three scriptural scenes celebrated in Christian art, Mary plays a critical role in the unfolding drama. A simple, Jewish girl says ‘yes’ to the Holy Spirit. From this, the Saviour is born (nativity); salvation is won (crucifixion); and the church comes to birth (Pentecost).