

# HEARERS OF THE WORD

Apocalypse 11:19,12:1-6,10; Ps 45 (44); 1 Corinthians 15:20-26; Luke 1:39-56

## Blessed is she who believed

Luke 1:39 In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, 40 where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. 41 When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit 42 and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. 43 And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? 44 For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. 45 And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her by the Lord."

46 And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord, 47 and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour, 48 for he has looked with favour on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; 49 for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name. 50 His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. 51 He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. 52 He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; 53 he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. 54 He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, 55 according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever."

Luke 1:56 And Mary remained with her about three months and then returned to her home.

### INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

The birth stories have a different, more symbolic-theological quality to the rest of the Gospel narrative. Here the meeting of cousins leads to a great hymn, rather political and revolutionary in tone and substance.

### KIND OF WRITING

The meeting of the cousins forms part of the structure below of Luke 1-2, in the following scheme: (the canticles are named in italics). The Magnificat is thought to come from the prayers of early Jewish Christians, who experienced real deprivation and who put their hope in God. It conforms to the three-fold pattern of hymns of praise:

- An introduction praising God (vv. 46b-47)
- The body of the hymn (vv. 48-53)
- A conclusion (vv. 54-55)

### OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND

Hannah prayed and said, "My heart exults in the Lord; my strength is exalted in my God. My mouth derides my enemies, because I rejoice in my victory. There is no Holy One like the Lord, no one besides you; there is no Rock like our God. Talk no more so very proudly, let not arrogance come from your mouth; for the Lord is a God of knowledge, and by him actions are weighed. The bows of the mighty are broken, but the feeble gird on strength. Those who were full have hired themselves out for bread, but those who were hungry are fat with spoil. The barren has borne seven, but she who has many children is forlorn. The Lord kills and brings to life; he brings down to Sheol and raises up. The Lord makes poor and makes rich; he brings low, he also exalts. He raises up the poor from the dust; he lifts the needy from the ash heap, to make them sit with princes and inherit a seat of honour. For the pillars of the earth are the Lord's, and on them he has set the world. "He will guard the feet of his

### Thought for the day

While we are used to thinking of Mary as enjoying exceptional privileges as a human being, on this day what happened to her, being in God's presence as a whole human being, prefigures our future as well. So this is a feast which looks backwards to the grace Mary enjoyed, but also forward to our own future in God's presence. We too, we believe, will stand before God with all the saints, fully present to God. Even if we cannot really picture such a future, we believe nevertheless in a God who loves all that we are, our bodies, our relationships, our history, our engagement in the real world.

### Prayer

Today, creator and redeemer God, we rejoice! We look forward to our sharing in those gifts in the world to come, when we will stand in your presence with all the saints. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

faithful ones, but the wicked shall be cut off in darkness; for not by might does one prevail. The Lord! His adversaries shall be shattered; the Most High will thunder in heaven. The Lord will judge the ends of the earth; he will give strength to his king, and exalt the power of his anointed." (1Samuel 2:1-10)

### NEW TESTAMENT FOREGROUND

Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common. With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all.

There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. They laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need. There was a Levite, a native of Cyprus, Joseph, to whom the apostles gave the name

<i>Annunciation</i> of the birth of John	1:5-25
<i>Annunciation</i> of the birth of Jesus	1:26-38
Visitation of Mary to Elizabeth	1:39-56 The <i>Magnificat</i>
The <i>birth</i> of John	1:57-80 The <i>Benedictus</i>
The <i>birth</i> of Jesus	2:1-21 The <i>Gloria</i>
Presentation in the Temple	2:22-40 The <i>Nunc Dimittis</i>

Barnabas (which means “son of encouragement”). He sold a field that belonged to him, then brought the money, and laid it at the apostles’ feet. (Acts 4:32–37)

#### ST PAUL

I do not say this as a command, but I am testing the genuineness of your love against the earnestness of others. For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich. And in this matter I am giving my advice: it is appropriate for you who began last year not only to do something but even to desire to do something—now finish doing it, so that your eagerness may be matched by completing it according to your means. For if the eagerness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has—not according to what one does not have. I do not mean that there should be relief for others and pressure on you, but it is a question of a fair balance between your present abundance and their need, so that their abundance may be for your need, in order that there may be a fair balance. As it is written, “The one who had much did not have too much, and the one who had little did not have too little.” (2Corinthians 8:8–15)

But you are not in the flesh; you are in the Spirit, since the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. But if Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you. (Romans 8:9–11)

#### BRIEF COMMENTARY

**Verse 39** Following the angel’s revelation, Mary visits Elizabeth.

**Verse 40** Zechariah is actually absent, although he received the annunciation.

**Verse 41** In Luke-Acts, it is the Holy Spirit who inspires and moves. The leaping of the child is a miraculous acknowledgement of the superiority of Jesus.

**Verse 42** A beatitude.

**Verse 43** A post-resurrection confession of faith in Jesus as Lord.

**Verse 44** Joy is typical of Luke—no

mere happiness, but end-time joy at salvation.

**Verse 45** Another beatitude, portraying Mary as a model believer.

**Verses 46-47** The phrase echoes Hannah’s hymn (cf. Ps 69:31; 35:9). The second line moves from praise to joy, a Lucan theme.

**Verse 48** Hannah is one of the poor ones (the *anawim*) because of her infertility. This may reflect the actual condition of the first generations of disciples as well. “From now on” signals the new time of salvation inaugurated by Jesus. Blessed = a beatitude.

**Verse 49** The “great things” are the deeds of salvation in the past now completed in Jesus’ death and resurrection. Cf. Act 2:11. God as mighty—cf. Luke 18:27. That God’s name is holy is widely attested. Cf. Is 57:15.

**Verse 50** An echo of: *But the steadfast love of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting on those who fear him, and his righteousness to children’s children.* (Psalm 103:17). Mercy is the covenant quality of God found for example in Exodus 34:6. Mary is shown praising God’s greatness, might, holiness and mercy.

**Verse 51** The allusion is to Ps 89:11. The first part of the verse shows the action of God and the second part the result. Conceit means also plotting / scheming. In the bible, the proud look down on others because they do not look up to God and are therefore always God’s enemies. Heart = mind in Semitic anthropology.

**Verse 52** Notice the parallelism (antithetic). There is a play on words, the mighty are put down by the one who is Mighty.

**Verse 53** Reversal of fortune is the hope of those who put their trust in God. Cf. Luke 20:10-11.

**Verse 54** Cf. But you, Israel, my servant, Jacob, whom I have chosen, the offspring of Abraham, my friend; you whom I took from the ends of the earth, and called from its farthest corners, saying to you, “You are my servant, I have chosen you and not cast you off”. (Isaiah 41:8–9) Cf. He has remembered his steadfast love and faithfulness to the house of Israel. All the ends of the earth have seen the victory of our God. (Psalms 98:3)

**Verse 55** Cf. You will show faithfulness

to Jacob and unswerving loyalty to Abraham, as you have sworn to our ancestors from the days of old. (Micah 7:20) God said to Abraham, “As for you, you shall keep my covenant, you and your offspring after you throughout their generations.” (Genesis 17:9) These closing lines recognise that the salvation that is to come through the birth and life, ministry and death of Jesus is related to the covenant made by God with Abraham of old. The Christians who said this hymn saw themselves as the remnant of Israel.

**Verse 56** It is, of course, strange that Mary seems not to stay for the birth (six plus three equals nine, after all), but Luke has no use for such an eventuality in his carefully contrasting layout of scenes.

#### POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. The story of the Visitation is a story of two pregnant women reaching out to one another. For those of you who are mothers, perhaps you have been in that situation. What blessings do you recall in such encounters?

2. The story and the song of Mary are both celebrating the work of God in their lives. When have you been particularly grateful for what was happening in your life? How did you express and celebrate your thanks?

3. Mary is praised for believing that God’s promise to her would be fulfilled. How has your trust in God’s promise to be with you helped you in your life?

4. Read the *Magnificat* a few times slowly and let your attention stay with whatever words or phrase you are drawn to. Place yourself in the position of the one saying the prayer. Let it be your prayer of thanksgiving for your own life.

#### PRAYER

Faithful to your promise, O God, you have lifted up the lowly, clothing with heavenly splendour the woman who bore Christ, our life and resurrection.

Grant that the Church, prefigured in Mary, may bear Christ to the world and come to share his triumph.

We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, God for ever and ever. Amen.

# But now Christ the first-fruits of those who have fallen asleep

1 Cor 15:20 But now Christ has been raised from the dead, the first-fruits of those who have fallen asleep. 21 For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead also came through a man. 22 For just as in Adam all die, so also in Christ all will be made alive. 23 But each in his own order: Christ, the first-fruits; then when Christ comes, those who belong to him. 24 Then comes the end, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father, when he has brought to an end all rule and all authority and power. 25 For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. 26 The last enemy to be eliminated is death. 27 *For he has put everything in subjection under his feet. But when it says "everything" has been put in subjection, it is clear that this does not include the one who put everything in subjection to him.* 28 And when all things are subjected to him, then the Son himself will be subjected to the one who subjected everything to him, so that God may be all in all.

## INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

The reading given is very suitable for feast day. It brings up the question of the end of time and hope in the resurrection of the dead, symbolised by the Assumption.

## KIND OF WRITING

Proof 1		
12	<b>Topic</b>	<i>Christ raised and no resurrection of the dead?</i>
13-19	<b>A</b>	<i>No resurrection at all = no risen Christ</i>
20-28	<b>B</b>	<b>Adam and Christ</b>
29-34	<b>A<sup>1</sup></b>	<i>No resurrection, what what's the point?</i>

The whole of 1 Corinthians 15 is laid out in the form of a speech, following the rhetorical conventions of the time.

- 1-2 Introduction
- 3-11 The agreed affirmations
- 12-34 Proof 1: illogicality
- 35-57 Proof 2: the resurrected "body"
- 58 Conclusion

Paul proceeds mostly by logic, a reasoning that any reasonable person could

follow. At two key points, he abandons "Greek" logic for faith affirmations, using the language of Jewish apocalyptic. These two sections, vv. 20-28 and vv. 44-49 (Adam Christ comparisons), should be read in tandem (see below). Proof One involves the following steps:

## ORIGIN OF THE READING

Paul answers confronts lost of problems and answers many questions 1 Corinthians. One of these questions touches on the resurrection of the dead. Evidently, some in the community believed fully Christ but, at the same time, did not believe that the dead would rise in Christ. This ancient question has a contemporary resonance. Often in our faith community, while people pray etc., at the same time they find it hard to image the next "stage" after death. This is perfectly understandable. Paul tackles the question in two ways (see below). First of all, he spends time showing the illogicality of their position (vv. 12-24). Then, he goes on to open up their imagination in a powerful discussion of the body, showing that "body" can mean many things, including the "spiritual body."

## RELATED PASSAGES

If there is a natural body, there is also a spiritual body. So also it is written, "The first man, Adam, became a living person"; the last Adam became a life-giving spirit. However, the spiritual did not come first, but the natural, and then the spiritual. The first man is from the earth, made of dust; the second man is from heaven. Like the one made of dust, so too are those made of dust, and like the one from heaven, so too those who are heavenly. And just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, let us also bear the image of the man of heaven. (1 Cor 15:44-49; cf. Rom 5:12-21)

## BRIEF COMMENTARY

**Verse 20** The "but now" is very strong introducing a contrary affirmation. In 20b, Paul uses the term first-fruits, an image taken from farming, whereby the first cutting was offered to God as a sign that the whole harvest was God's. Notice the switch from "dead" to "sleep", suggesting a condition from which we will awaken (= to rise).

**Verse 21** In Apocalyptic, the beginning

and the end resemble each other, a congruity suggesting a divine pattern or plan.

**Verse 22** The general principle of v. 21 is applied to the question of death. The congruity is not perfect: death in Adam, life in Christ, one negative, the other positive.

**Verse 23** Apocalyptic was interested in the sequence of the end. Paul uses that interest here to account for the fact that we still die and that the victory over death, already achieved, is not complete until the very end. Hence, people still died. Cf. 1 Thess 4:13-18.

**Verse 24** Only after the resurrection of the dead will the kingdom be finally established. The next verses expand on this claim.

**Verse 25** All his enemies = all the forces of evil and destruction, including death.

**Verse 26** Even though Christ himself is risen and victory is assured, death still exercises *apparent* power over life, as we all know.

**Verse 27** To subject may sound it. The nuance is to place in order, to subordinate and so to control. It is part of the language of the sequence of the end. This subordination does not, of course, include God.

**Verse 28** The repetition of subject/subordinate is strong: God, the Son, the world (all), in that order. The jubilant tone anticipates the later v. 57: *But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ!* (1 Cor 15:57) In this way, the sequence of the end points to God's overall plan, not immediately apparent in our ordinary experience.

## POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. What has shaped my own faith in life after death? Where there significant moments of evolution in conviction?
2. Does my faith in Jesus' resurrection shape my hope for death in Christ?

## PRAYER

Living God, your desire is that we should be fully alive in Christ and free from all fear. Help us embrace our faith in such a way that it truly sets our hearts free to love and service without counting the cost. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

## A woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars

Rev 11:19 Then God's temple in heaven was opened, and the ark of his covenant was seen within his temple; and there were flashes of lightning, rumblings, peals of thunder, an earthquake, and heavy hail.

Rev 12:1 A great portent appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars. 2 She was pregnant and was crying out in birthpangs, in the agony of giving birth. 3 Then another portent appeared in heaven: a great red dragon, with seven heads and ten horns, and seven diadems on his heads. 4 His tail swept down a third of the stars of heaven and threw them to the earth. Then the dragon stood before the woman who was about to bear a child, so that he might devour her child as soon as it was born. 5 And she gave birth to a son, a male child, who is to rule all the nations with a rod of iron. But her child was snatched away and taken to God and to his throne; 6 and the woman fled into the wilderness, where she has a place prepared by God, so that there she can be nourished for one thousand two hundred sixty days.

Rev 12:7 And war broke out in heaven; Michael and his angels fought against the dragon. The dragon and his angels fought back, 8 but they were defeated, and there was no longer any place for them in heaven. 9 The great dragon was thrown down, that ancient serpent, who is called the Devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world—he was thrown down to the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him.

10 Then I heard a loud voice in heaven, proclaiming, "Now have come the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Messiah, for the accuser of our comrades has been thrown down, who accuses them day and night before our God. 11 But they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they did not cling to life even in the face of death. 12 Rejoice then, you heavens and those who dwell in them! But woe to the earth and the sea, for the devil has come down to you with great wrath, because he knows that his time is short!"

Rev 12:13 So when the dragon saw that he had been thrown down to the earth, he pursued the woman who had given birth to the male



child. 14 But the woman was given the two wings of the great eagle, so that she could fly from the serpent into the wilderness, to her place where she is nourished for a time, and times, and half a time. 15 Then from his mouth the serpent poured water like a river after the woman, to sweep her away with the flood. 16 But the earth came to the help of the woman; it opened its mouth and swallowed the river that the dragon had poured from his mouth. 17 Then the dragon was angry with the woman, and went off to make war on the rest of her children, those who keep the commandments of God and hold the testimony of Jesus.

### INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

On its own, this excerpted reading from the New Testament Apocalypse will be incomprehensible to practically everyone, clergy not excluded. The application of the text to the Blessed Virgin is a later tradition, yielding an accommodated interpretation. In these notes, we will try to present what the text might have meant at the time of writing. To make sense of the reading, the whole of chapter 12 should be read, with a keen eye to the genre of writing.

### KIND OF WRITING

The Apocalypse belongs to a genre of writing — Apocalyptic — fairly popular are the turn of the eras. Apocalyptic responds to a perennial human question: where is God in unjust suffering? In other words, it is a particular, highly symbolic presentation of theodicy, in the context of some level of persecution.

Apocalyptic writings are, in turn, the expression of Apocalypticism, a widely felt spiritual current, claiming that God would eventually reveal himself to be just at the end of human history. In the

meantime, the suffering faithful are exhorted to steadfast endurance, because God has a future in store, a future which will include the resurrection of the dead.

Jesus himself, with his preaching of the Kingdom and conversion, was an Apocalyptic Jewish prophet. Likewise, Paul was an Apocalyptic Pharisee and he never really changed, except that he believed that the end had begun already precisely in Jesus' resurrection, which he understood apocalyptically.

Apart from the stray half verse from chapter 11 (itself an accommodating interpretation), in chapter 12, there are four symbolic stories, which may be listed as follows:

A (vv. 1-6): within time, the birth of Jesus.

B (vv. 7-9): before time began, the birth of evil.

C (vv. 10-12): after time, the victory of the faithful.

D. (vv. 13-17): within time, the current experience of the persecuted faithful.

These four mythological, highly symbolic stories are offered in the wrong chronological sequence. The correct order should have been: the pre-history (B), the birth of Jesus within history (A), the current experience of the church (D), leading to the promise of final, eschatological victory (C).

We may then ask what is the narrative effect of upsetting the natural order? Thus the normal sequence in A and D is sequentially broken in order to add the perspective of the primordial myth and eschatological myth, of which the second (Story C) interprets the first (Story B). This retrospective interpretation is, of course, the whole point of the Apocalypse as such, and here inserted to give meaning to the suffering of the church across time. There is a threefold purpose in inserting Stories B and C: first of all to bring together the problem and resolution of the question of evil; secondly, to show that the resolution takes place within history and thirdly, to show that the experience of suffering is to do with questions about the purpose of the entire creation, that is, an experience of the ultimate purpose of God.

Our author is very keen to show that the duality evil/ good is not resolved *outside time* nor by *escaping from time*. Rather the goal is historical. To achieve this purpose he uses three effects: (i) the insertion of the two myths into an essentially his-

torical sequence; (ii) the connection between the death of Jesus (12:5), the eschatological fulfilment (12:10) and the present experience of Christians (12:10 and 17); (iii) the constant “return to earth” which marks each story. At the end of each story, the dragon is on earth — to capture the woman, thrown down by Michael, vanquished but released for a time, challenging the faithful. To misuse the celebrated expression of Bultmann, the writer is demythologising apocalyptic and claiming that the present moment, for all its banality, is the theatre where the primordial struggle of good and evil is worked out. Such is the calibre of the times. Hence the use of the “wrong” chronological sequence.

#### ORIGIN OF THE READING

Not far from John’s island prison is the island of Delos, sacred to the Greeks because, in a story known to all John’s hearer-readers from childhood, there the divine Apollo had been born. His mother Leto had fled there to escape the dragon Python, who wanted to kill the new born son of Zeus. Instead of being killed, Apollo returns to Delphi and kills the dragon.

The basic outline of this plot is found in the mythical folklore of many peoples. It is a variation of the story of how the forces of darkness, disorder, and sterility/death rebelled against the divine king of light order, and fertility/life, attempting to overthrow the divine order, kill the new-born king, and/or seize the kingship and establish the rule of darkness. This story, like all such myths, is an expression and interpretation of the human story as part of the cosmic conflict between good and evil, just as it expresses the common experience of humanity that there is always a new day after the darkness of night: the darkness-dragon attempts to destroy the sun god, but is himself killed as the new day dawns.

The Roman emperors found the myth politically useful. Apollo was understood as the primeval king who had reigned over a “golden age” of peace and prosperity. Augustus, the first emperor, interpreted his own rule in terms of this tradition, claiming that his administration was the golden Age and casting himself in the role of the new Apollo. Nero erected statues to himself as the god Apollo. There were coins on which the radiance of the sun god emanates from the Emperor’s head. A grateful citizen of the Roman world could readily think of the story as a reflection of his or her

own experience, with the following cast: the woman is the goddess Roma, the queen of heaven; the son is the emperor, who kills the dragon and founds the new Golden Age; the dragon represents the power of darkness, that oppose the goodness of life.

Thus, Revelation 12 is, in its political and culture context, highly resonant.

#### RELATED PASSAGES

The New Testament Apocalypse alludes to many passages in the Bible.

The LORD God said to the serpent, “Because you have done this, cursed are you among all animals and among all wild creatures; upon your belly you shall go, and dust you shall eat all the days of your life. I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will strike your head, and you will strike his heel.” (Genesis 3:14–15)

Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel. (Isaiah 7:14)

Like a woman with child, who writhes and cries out in her pangs when she is near her time, so were we because of you, O LORD. (Isaiah 26:17)

On that day the LORD with his cruel and great and strong sword will punish Leviathan the fleeing serpent, Leviathan the twisting serpent, and he will kill the dragon that is in the sea. (Isaiah 27:1)

You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself. (Exodus 19:4)

At that time Michael, the great prince, the protector of your people, shall arise. There shall be a time of anguish, such as has never occurred since nations first came into existence. But at that time your people shall be delivered, everyone who is found written in the book. (Daniel 12:1)

“Who is this that looks forth like the dawn, fair as the moon, bright as the sun, terrible as an army with banners?” (Song 6:10)

#### BRIEF COMMENTARY

**Verse 19a** This half verse is included because in much later tradition, Mary was regarded honorifically as the ark of the covenant. This is not the original meaning but an accommodated one.

**Verse 1** the image is taken from the Song of Songs (see above). The woman represents the eternal feminine, powerful and glorious.

**Verse 2** In Apocalyptic writings, labour pains are symbolic of current sufferings, which are nevertheless the prelude to a new birth.

**Verse 3** Matching the woman stands the symbol of primordial evil and death, the polar opposite of goodness and new birth.

**Verse 4** The cosmic threat of the dragon is clear. In a repelling image, the dragon wants to destroy the child as soon as it is born — the followers of the child will also be persecuted, some to the point of death.

**Verse 5** V. 5a references the Psalm 2:9, in relation to Jesus as Messiah. V. 5b references Exodus 19:4, symbolically pointing to the resurrection of Jesus from the dead.

**Verse 6** The woman now refers to the faith community as “mother” who has taken refuge, under threat, in the wilderness. 1,260 days = three and half years (>< seven), indicating that although intense, the period of suffering is circumscribed, limited by God.

**Verse 10** The lectionary excerpt jumps forward to the hymn of victory, the song of the faithful in the world to come.

#### POINTERS FOR PRAYER

**1.** What is my own experience of struggle and opposition when it comes to my faith? How do I cope? Where do I find the courage to continue to bear witness?

**2.** Confidence in God and God’s future for us does not have to lead to complacency — on the contrary! Precisely because it is all in the hands of God, I am free to engage and commit with my whole being.

#### PRAYER

God, you are always faithful and our future lies in your hands. Help us to live from this conviction that we may not be overwhelmed by the challenges of today. Give us the trust and faith which sustained Mary, the mother of the Lord.

We ask this through the same Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, God for ever and ever.

# THE LITURGY

Apocalypse 11:19,12:1-6,10; Ps 45 (44); 1 Corinthians 15:20-26; Luke 1:39-56

## ACROSS THE READINGS

Because the feast celebrates a later devotional evolution, the first two readings are examples of “accommodation.” Read in their original sense at the time of writing, both represent examples of Christian Apocalyptic hope — the conviction that God will be faithful to us all, across the bar of death. The feast itself serves to illustrate the same hope: the destiny of Mary is the destiny of all the disciples of Jesus.

## THE RESPONSORIAL PSALM

Psalm 45 (44) does not quite respond to the first reading. Instead, it takes up nuptial symbolism, frequently used for the covenant between God and Israel, and applies it to Mary, the “ark of the covenant.”

## FEAST DAY INTRODUCTIONS

### *Apocalypse 11:19, 12:1-6, 10*

This unusual reading is really about the motherhood of the church and the martyrdom of early Christians. By an accommodated interpretation, it is read for the feast.

### *1 Corinthians 15:20-26*

Our text is really a good example of Christian apocalyptic. One of the concerns of apocalyptic writings was the sequence of the end or when we will see the total victory over death. Paul believed in this, but knew it was not yet.

### *Luke 1:39-56*

The prayer of Mary can still cause surprise because it is not about having a baby but about social reversal or revolution. We overhear in these words the prayer of the Christian *anawim* YHWH or the poor of the Lord.

## WEEKDAY INTRODUCTIONS

### **Monday 16 August**

*St Stephen of Hungary*

### *Judges 2:11-19*

The book of Judges tells of the intermediate time between the entry into the Land and the setting up of a monarchy. Many, many times, it tells of the people falling into idolatrous practices with disastrous consequences.

### *Matthew 19:16-22*

A failed calling is always tough to listen to. It does remind us that we become disciples not because *we* choose it but rather the *Lord* chooses us

### **Tuesday 17 August**

*Our Lady of Knock*

### *Judges 6:11-24*

In response to social chaos and religious idolatry, God appoints leaders for his people, called “judges.” Today we hear of the call of Gideon and of his encounter with God, a memorable tale.

### *Matthew 19:23-30*

The question of Peter might seem strange, but riches were regarded as a blessing from God. How could a *gift from God* hinder us? Thus we see the values of the kingdom are quite “alternative.”

### **Wednesday 18 August**

### *Judges 9:6-15*

Our reading today is a justly famous parable from the Old Testament. Using the imagery of trees in a forest looking for a ruler, it warns against setting up a monarchy because only God should be the king over Israel. The shade of the thorn bush offers more than “pleasant coolness in the heat!” Monarchies, we are told, colonise and exploit and therefore be careful in wishing for one.

### *Matthew 20:1-16*

This passage can surprise and even offend still. It is, of course, no basis for labour relations but a great basis for God-relations! Such a relief that we don't have to merit it or earn it in any way—all is grace.

### **Thursday 19 August**

*St John Eudes, priest*

### *Judges 11:29-39*

This “text of terror” is a dreadful warning against losing faith and making foolish oaths. It is not at all a moral story but rather an illustration of terrible consequences when the centre does not hold.

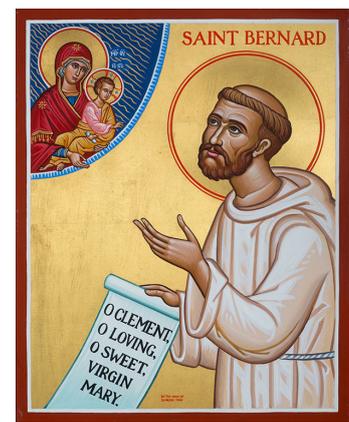
### *Matthew 22:1-14*

To “get” this parable, it is vital to hear it on two levels. There is the level of the historical Jesus, using traditional festal

and nuptial imagery for the kingdom. There is the level of church, looking back and what actually happened to Jesus, the messiah and prophet.

### **Friday 20 August**

*St Bernard, abbot and doctor*



### *Ruth 1:1, 3-6, 14-16, 22*

The wonderful short novel which is the book Ruth begins in a sombre way, with three deaths and three widows. Ruth's devotion to her mother-in-law is exemplary. (Not *really* suitable for weddings, however!!)

### *Matthew 22:34-40*

Asked a penetrating question, Jesus as a good Jew gives two answers. The first is really the *Sh'ma Yisrael*, recited three times daily by observant Jews. The second great principle comes from a somewhat unlikely source, the book of Leviticus.

### **Saturday 21 August**

*St Pius X, bishop of Rome*

### *Ruth 2:1-3, 8-11, 4:13-17*

The women in this story are not without initiative. Of course, Ruth's reputation of faithfulness is very attractive and, as an extra bonus, a foreigner enters the lineage of the future David. Thus the book counters any trace of exclusionary nationalism.

### *Matthew 23:1-12*

Jesus is hard on the outward display of religion and the piling up of titles. It can still disturb today. Does Jesus have an alternative, another way? Yes—in a word, service.