

## THOUGHTS FOR APRIL 2016

Friday 1<sup>st</sup> April

I hope you are planning to prepare the Readings for this Sunday, 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Easter. It will be Mercy Sunday and the Gospel is from John 20: 19 – 31. It tells the story of Thomas, the disciple often depicted as “the doubting Thomas”. We all remember the text that tells us that Thomas missed out on seeing Jesus when the other apostles met Him in the upper room and then refused to believe saying “unless I can see the print of the nails in His hands and place my hand in His side, I will not believe” Recently I came across a quite different description of Thomas’ first personal encounter with the Risen Lord. The writer described this meeting not as one to cause Thomas shame, but as “The Pentecost experience of Thomas!” What a different interpretation for a familiar Bible passage! Is there someone in your immediate family who says the Faith is lost to them? Such expressions as: “Well, that was all very well when I was a kid, I liked stories of Jesus. But now I see the world through grown-up eyes and have no time for fairy stories” If those or similar opinions are expressed by your own grown children, how painful they can be! “Where did we as parents go wrong?” you may be worrying. Jesus, Who is so real to you and Who you thought you had shared with your kids is now being denied by them and being relegated to a child’s story! Memories flood back of this same son or daughter long ago telling you of their love for Jesus and of watching how the child would copy you while at prayer with obvious devotion. Today’s first Reading is from the Acts of the Apostles Chapter 5: 12 – 26 and it paints a similar picture. The apostles were “held in high honour” and “many signs and wonders were done among the people.” What a marvellous time for them! But our knowledge of Scripture assures us that this ephemeral stage was not to last. Persecutions, beatings, mockery and so on would soon come and the faith of each of the apostles and other first Christians would be tested by fire. St. John too has a “Pentecost experience” in his lonely exile on the island of Patmos as expressed in the second reading from Revelation 1: 9 – 19. He sees the Son of Man (Jesus) and hears Him say, “Fear not, I am the first and the last, and the living one: I die and behold I am alive..” Faith is a grace we can’t give to anyone, but we can share our own as you did when your kids were small. Rest assured that now as grownups they are longing for a reassurance of the nearness of the Living Lord. Can you believe that Jesus, the God of Mercy will bestow that “Pentecost experience” He gave to Thomas and the other apostles – and that you yourself know so well- to all His lost sheep?

Mon. 04<sup>th</sup> April

I wonder if you are still keeping up your sharing in your family, parish or Bible group! It is quite a sacrifice to go off to these sessions after or during a busy day, but they can be very rewarding and fulfilling. The group usually tends to bond together and become a great support for all the members. We began a group some time ago in our parish and at first we made use of Br. Chalmers excellent book, “Bread that will last” which sets out to help us grow in our understanding of Scripture through experience. We found the sharing very helpful – though we often got off the topic and began sharing life experiences. “Off the topic?” but weren’t we trying to experience God through His Word and how better to experience that than through our life experiences as they resonate with Scripture? When Lent came along there was a request to make a change. The participants were very keen to reflect on the Sunday Readings – something that most of them had never done before. So we put Br. Chalmers’ book away for the duration of Lent and turned to the Sunday Readings. Books we used to guide us included The Bible Diary, The Jesuit Daily Reflections for Lent and the book “Seasons of the Word” by Fr. Denis McBride. How inspiring for the Sisters in the group – who do this kind of sharing on a very regular basis - to witness the excitement of the members who had never before shared in this way! We reveled in our participation and learnt a great deal from the other members. As the weeks went by, I often suggested

at the end of the session that we should “end with prayer”. This usually led to one of three responses, 1. an awkward silence. 2. request that “one of the Sisters should pray” or 3. the recitation of a Hail Mary (or other prayer said by rote) Have you had the same experience in your group? On the whole Catholics are not used to praying spontaneously aloud! If your experience mirrors ours in any way, don’t give up, be patient. If our group is anything to go by, the break-through will come! Recently after suggesting that someone might like to pray, the shyest member of the group began to pray. She sounded a bit nervous, but her courage helped other members. On that day in that group, EVERYONE participated in spontaneous prayer

2.

2.

Tues 05<sup>th</sup> April

The cover picture on the Catholic magazine “The Tablet” showed two children walking hand in hand in the mud on a beach. The boy looked about 6 and the girl maybe 8. Did I say children? I wish you could see this picture, the bodies and stature are that of children, but the faces are those of saddened, abused, neglected and desperate grownups! Where are they walking? On the beach near Calais in France. They are among 5 000 migrants kept in a camp aptly called “The Jungle”. Both the children would have witnessed murder, rape and countless other horrors in their own country and possibly lost dear loved ones in death. Then they would have walked miles and miles, been put on leaky boats and told that they were going to a wonderful place – perhaps Germany or England - where they would once more return to their lost childhood. Did that happen? In the camp there are people from Sudan, Afghanistan, Syria and Eritrea. When they reached the upmarket town of Calais, they were immediately taken to this terrible barren Camp – France says that most of them wanted to go to the UK so that country is responsible for them. England rejects more migrants. The Catholic Agencies – plus those from other Faiths – are active in the Camp providing Charitable help. People get one meal a day, but often have to wait for hours until they get it. Old boxes, broken ferries, special kits to provide shelter are brought in and the migrants have to huddle them together to make a “home”. Surprisingly, in the Camp there is a simple Ethiopian- rite Church and the priest says the Sunday attendance is good. The walls have been decorated by the migrants with beautiful paintings, prominently ones of the Archangel Michael defeating Satan. The migrants had built the Church and kept up the paintings themselves.

I couldn’t help wondering if the Archangel had been entirely successful in his attempts to defeat Satan if ethnic difference, squabbles over available resources, politics and wars in the people’s homelands forces them to take such horrific journeys of flight. And, once they are away from the horrors of their own countries, why do people, as the Pope said, “treat migrants with a culture of indifference?” Maybe, in your time of prayer tonight you might spare a thought for the thousands of people in similar situations overseas and, even in our own beloved South Africa. One tap for hundreds of people, not enough chance for showering or toilet facilities is the norm in refugee Camps worldwide. I have heard that the one near Calais called, “The Jungle,” has been closed and some of the inmates forcibly returned to their countries of origin. Nevertheless, there are people on our own doorsteps who suffer similar deprivation. If you can help in some way, please do so. How wonderful if the sad faces of the migrant children could light up in gratitude and they could become children again rather than small, miserable old people.

Wed. 06<sup>th</sup> April

Every week I accompany three wonderful parishioners to a prison to run an Alpha Course for the inmates. It has taken time this year to establish the group – we would be told, “No, you can’t have Alpha today.... they are being tested for TB.... they have been taken to play soccer... they are locked up because they were fighting...etc. etc.” That, after having spent R150,00 on the petrol to get there! Well,

at last this week we were successful and started Alpha with a motley group of young men. First we had to clean the tables which had not been wiped after breakfast and were generously sprinkled with uneaten porridge. Then we did Praise and Worship, watched the Alpha film and divided into groups of 7 or 8 men. My group had six Portuguese-speaking and three English-speaking men. Fortunately one of them could translate for me from Portuguese to English! Nicky Gumbel, the Alpha founder had talked a great deal about building up a relationship with Our Lord. He compared it to courtship, the time when ideally the young lady and her partner get to know and love each other by intimate communication. His description of how he and his wife, Pippa, grew in closeness during their first acquaintance and on into their engagement was really moving. Unfortunately that was difficult to get over to this group of poor, dispirited men! Had they ever developed a relationship with a young lady? Many of them were probably in the Correctional Centre for rape, murder and other violent offences! I thought talking about their relationship with their mothers or grandmothers might be more familiar territory so I said, "You know how close you are to your mother. You can usually tell her anything and she will still love you" One man blurted out in very poor English, "Mother dead!" My translator asked him to enlarge on this and when it was all in English, this was his story. His family immigrated from Mozambique and here his mother died of AIDS when he was three years old and a neighbouring family took him in. As he grew up no one told him that he did not really belong to that family and that his mother was dead. When he was eleven years old his stepmother said, "I am leaving this place with the other children. You are not my son – your mother died when you were three" She then left him in the street. He begged for food and shelter, but eventually got into crime. I felt like crying and imagined how much our Merciful Father must love these broken people and want me to help them in some way. But, what could I do? I put my arm round him and said, "From now on, I am your mother – come again next week. We will learn more about building up a relationship with Jesus" Doesn't that sound tame and almost useless as a word of comfort for a man who has never experienced a loving family? I suppose it does, but it was all I could think of saying before I would have made a fool of myself by crying. It also made me so grateful for my own wonderful family and my Dominican Sisters in community and more determined than ever to try to help this group of men to meet the Jesus Who is the centre of my own life.

3.

Thurs. 07<sup>th</sup> April

The cover of a free advertising leaflet popped into our letter box just before Easter last month showed a delicious-looking cake and was headed, "Have a hippity, hoppity Easter!" As it was Holy Week, we Sisters were shocked by this frivolous approach to the sacred season. "Why do they mock Christianity?" was one response and another was, "Cakes and Easter eggs do not represent the meaning of Easter!" Anyway, it was a nice picture so I decided to cut it out to use in the classroom! Naturally, I would cut off the words "Easter" and "hippity, hoppity" but as the magazine lay on my table, it gave me food for thought. Did the designer intend to mock Christianity? Would he or she have known about the Christian Feast of Easter or the significance of Holy Week? Almost certainly not, the designer would have been paid to get people to look at the cover, open up to the advertisements and then go and buy some of the products. I don't think he/she would have achieved that end by putting a picture of Good Friday on the cover!! It's the same with Christmas which has been downgraded to "the Festive Season" implying that it is all about good food and drink! But then I began to think about days of importance to other people which hold very little significance for us, like Divali or the Chinese New Year. Would I have been able to choose a relevant picture to represent such occasions and would I have known how to avoid offending people for whom such days are very special? Probably not – and, if my main aim was to get people to buy food and drink, I might not have even tried to respect their feelings. Perhaps this is a rather silly example of thoughtlessness towards what other people hold sacred, but somehow I feel that we could all practise more sensitivity towards people who have different beliefs from our own. When I

was growing up, we were told that we should not sing certain hymns because, we were assured they were “not Catholic”. One was “Onward Christian soldiers” and another “On a hill far away”. Both are now sung in many Catholic Churches. The Vatican Council in the 1960’s attempted to teach us much more tolerance and love for others, but if it has only succeeded in getting us to sing certain hymns, the brave writers of the documents brought out after the Council must be very disappointed. I suggest that we all try to get to know the beliefs and customs of our neighbours and give them the respect they deserve. Racism is often fuelled by ignorance and Christian love and acceptance are powered by the Holy Spirit, Who is eager to “enkindle in us the fire of Love”.

Fri. 08<sup>th</sup> April

3<sup>rd</sup> Sun of Easter

Once more we are called to get ready for Sunday Mass by looking up the liturgy and, hopefully, finding someone with whom we can share on the Readings. I would love to know if some Catholic families have made this a custom and find it helpful. The Readings for this Sunday, the third Sunday of Easter C are Acts: 5: 27 – 41, Revelations: 5: 11 – 14 and John 21: 1 – 19. There are times during the Church year when it is difficult to discern the message meant for us and we may wish that we could choose our own Readings. Not so during the Easter season! All the Readings seem to open up to us even on first perusal and we are often given wonderful insights. Well, that was what happened to the apostles all those years ago and we can catch a glimpse of their zeal when we read from any Easter Gospel or from one of the Biblical letter-writers who shares on the Paschal theme. I think we could probably say that most of the TV soapies could be summed up as one person trying to find out if another loves him/her - universal theme, isn't it? And most viewers never tire of that theme! St. John, the Beloved disciple is often depicted as resting on the breast of Jesus or looking up into His face with deep love. In the second reading for today taken from the book of Revelation John is in exile on the island of Patmos and those glorious days of being close to Jesus physically are well over, but what wonderful vision of the Presence of Jesus are bestowed on him in that deserted setting! In the first reading the apostles are given a strict injunction by the authorities “Don't ever speak in the name of this Jesus again!” – a command they were quite happy to spend the rest of their days disobeying! In the lovely Gospel from John 21, Peter is feeling very guilty about his denial of Jesus which had taken place quite recently and is shy about meeting Jesus for fear of being upbraided or even dismissed and no longer asked by Jesus to be the Rock on whom Jesus the Church should be built.. What a different experiences he has to what he might have feared! Jesus only wants to hear his protestation of love before asking Peter to “feed his sheep” and “follow Him.” What question would you like to share on in preparation for this Sunday's Liturgy? Could it be:

1. Do I sense the loving gaze of Jesus as I wrestle with my guilt feelings over my sins?  
Or: How can we as a family show forgiveness to each other? Or, maybe
2. Do we speak out in the name of Jesus even in the face of resistance or rejection as the apostles did?

4

Mon. 11<sup>th</sup> April

“There is a well inside me – and God is in that well”. I am not sure who said that, but it is a paraphrase of what Jesus said to the Samaritan woman at the well. “I am the Living Water” (John 4:) She was a very-much despised woman, coming for her water at the common well when no one else was around because her life-style made people shun her. And did Jesus shun her? Not at all – He initiated a conversation with her, not caring what anybody seeing Him might suggest or insinuate. At first even the woman was suspicious – why was He talking to her when she was “only a Samaritan”? What did He want from her – wouldn't this be a good time to argue about which mountain to worship on – the one honoured by the Jews or the Samaritan's favourite one? But such a discussion was not what Jesus had in mind! He knew of her aching shame, her longing to be respected and her loneliness and He was

ready to take time to offer her what only He can give – Living Water. Perhaps when you are in your quiet place today, you might just imagine yourself to BE that woman and feel the Presence of Jesus with you. He does not accuse or judge us, He wants to fill us with the contentment that comes from drinking deeply of His Love and feeling the touch of His forgiveness. As far as we know, Jesus had never made the astonishing announcement to His apostles that He made to the Samaritan woman that day. He said: “I am (the Messiah), I who am talking to you.” If you hear Our Lord saying to you, “I am talking to you”, it will be a precious moment in your prayer. May you be as enthusiastic to spread the knowledge of Jesus to others as the Samaritan woman was that day, John writes in verse 29 that the woman went into the town (the very town where she was despised and shunned) and said, “Come and see the man who told me everything I have ever done. Could he be the Messiah?” except that in your prayer, you will not need to have to ask anyone else to corroborate your Faith in Jesus! You will feel His Presence and be able to delight in absorbing His Living Water. Remember: “There is a Well within me – and God is that Well!”

Tues 12th April

I think I told the rather amusing story about how an old man in Kimberley questioned the date for Easter once. Forgive me if you heard this before, but it is relevant to my topic today which is how the date for Easter is established. It was just after our new South African Democracy had been proclaimed and there were quite exciting changes being introduced by the A.N.C. leaders of our beloved country. Easter that year was extremely early and this man accosted me as I walked through Galeshewe. “Why is Easter so early this year?” he demanded and I could guess that he thought this was just another change being brought in by the new regime! Hastening to set his mind at rest, I replied, “Oh, the date for Easter has nothing to do with the Government, it is set by the moon”. He seemed to be enraged by this reply and said, “The moon! I am not a Moslem, I am a Roman Catholic!!” I moved graciously on along the road, not wanting to be seen in a fight with a man about the Church Calendar!! But this year, 2016, Easter was early and in other years it is much later – does that really have anything to do with the moon! Now, I know many of you have studied these things in depth and don’t need an explanation from me! If this is the case with you, I suggest you turn the radio off right now! One year when I was a teenager I went to Church on Holy Thursday at night and was impressed by the lovely moon – I was surprised the next year to notice that this happened again! It was some years before I realized that Easter is set to be always in late March (after the 21<sup>st</sup> March) or in April after the full moon. Why the 21<sup>st</sup> March? – because the bishops gathered at Nicea in A.D. 325 assumed that Spring began on the 21<sup>st</sup> March in Europe. Well, if you are still listening, did you know that there is talk among the various Christian denominations – including our own Catholic Church- of coming to an agreement as to a fixed date for Easter? Even various leaders of the Eastern Churches have all expressed interest in finding a common date when all would celebrate Easter Day together. And when did these discussions first originate? I believe there were deep discussions on this topic in 1582!!! I must stop now, but will continue on this topic tomorrow.

5.

Wed. 13<sup>th</sup> April

If you happened to listen to my “Thoughts for the Day” yesterday, you will remember that I was talking about a possible agreement among Christian denominations about Fixing the date for Easter. Did you think this was a very typical 21<sup>st</sup> century idea! If so, you must have been surprised to hear that the original arrangement was made in AD 325! At that time the Council of Nicea decided that Spring begins in Europe on 21<sup>st</sup> March each year and that Easter would occur on the first Sunday after the full moon following that date. This can occur any time after 21<sup>st</sup> March until the end of April. Maybe this doesn’t sound very logical to you and maybe you are smiling indulgently at our predecessors in the fourth century. After all, they were still using Julius Caesar’s season-based calendar of fixed months with one leap year every fourth year. The leap year is actually a bit long and after 133 years you have added one

day too many! They didn't have computers or modern technology so they just accepted that Spring begins every year on 21<sup>st</sup> March and were prepared to let Easter move around each year according to the appearance of the full moon. But the idea of making an adjustment and fixing the Date for Easter did not originate in 2016. As I mentioned yesterday, the first discussions about fixing the date for Easter began in the 16<sup>th</sup> century – in 1582 to be precise. That was about the time that the Gregorian calendar was introduced and the reformers then hoped that all Christendom would agree on this matter. The reformers did not want the Protestant, Catholic and Orthodox Easter celebrations to be on different days so they kept to the idea of a moveable feast. As it happened, the Protestant churches took 200 years to accept the new arrangements and the Orthodox Churches never accepted it! Their Easter and Christmas celebrations take place at a different time from other Christian Churches. Irrelevant information? Perhaps it is and, anyway, you could probably find a much more detailed and scholarly explanation on Google. So why did I take all the trouble to devote two days of Thoughts for the Day to the subject of Fixing the date for Easter? Two reasons spring to mind:

1. At the Council of Nicea in AD 325, there was almost no split in Christian denominations. There were, of course, heretical teachings which separated Christians, but there were no Protestant, Catholic or Orthodox Churches. People just were Christians. One of my interests in the move to Fix the date stems from my support for Pope Francis in his openness to all people of any Christian or other Faith.
2. In 1582, the Church agreed to a moveable date for Easter in an attempt not to split Christianity any more than it was already split.

Let's pray for Church Unity and an end to the scandal of division among the people who follow Jesus Who Himself prayed "that we may all be one".

Thurs. 14<sup>h</sup> April

How accustomed we Catholics are to seeing the figure of Jesus stretched out on the cross, hands and feet nailed down on the wood. One of the pictures that helps me to pray portrays Jesus on the cross in quite a different way. The crucifix pictured is from a Church near the Cathedral in the town of Wurzburg in Germany. Jesus is looking at us with intense love and compassion and His Hands, though each pierced by a huge nail, are held in front of His Body in a symbolic hugging gesture. His face is contorted in agony, but is still compassionate and tender. His mouth is open as if He is speaking to those who are looking at Him. How I wish this were a TV show and I could show you this beautiful and famous representation of Jesus on the cross! If you are fortunate enough to be able to get into Google, I expect you would be able to find a picture of it yourself. Why it appeals to me is that I can dwell on it in prayer and almost hear Jesus telling me lovingly of His concern for me and asking for my love in return. Maybe you might be able to use your crucifix at home when you are at your QUIET TIME and want to commune with Jesus.

6.

Fri. 15<sup>th</sup> April

This Sunday will be the 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter and the Readings will be: Acts 13 & 14, Revelation 7 and a very short but beautiful Gospel from John 10: 27 – 30. The theme of the Sunday Readings is "Jesus is the Shepherd" They say that in New Zealand there are far more sheep than people and, when you see

pictures of the rolling green hills in that country, it is easy to romanticize the role of a gentle, well-respected Shepherd. In our first Reading from the Acts, we might initially see Paul and Barnabas as honoured “Shepherds in Jesus’ Name.” The Passion, Resurrection, Ascension and Pentecost experiences are never-to-be-forgotten events for the early Christians and there is eager activity on the part of the apostles to bring people to Christianity. At first we might also expect these activities to be met with resounding success! In the text from Acts today we read: “many Jews and devout converts to Judaism followed Paul and Barnabas” Does this mean that these “Shepherds of Jesus’ Way” were applauded by everyone in the region – or, even by the majority of his listeners? Well, if we look at the original “Good Shepherd” and how many people rejected His loving call, we will surely doubt this. Jesus told His sheep “As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you” and was crucified by the very people He came to save. Paul and Barnabas experience harsh persecution in the same cause. In the Gospel Jesus says: “My sheep hear my voice and I know them. They follow me and I give them eternal life.” But He said this just after some of the Jews had rejected Him and this rejection continues to our day – even by many Christians. Can we still believe that Jesus is waiting lovingly in His Mercy to receive each of us, His sheep? Let’s ask Him to strengthen our Faith in His ceaseless Mercy

Mon. 18<sup>th</sup> April

It was Easter time and we had spent some Catechetical funds on Easter eggs for the children. They were so expensive and, in our small parish, we don’t get lavish financial support. The teachers gave one small egg to each child and they were very happy. When they went home and I was tidying up, I noticed that there were still six little eggs in the box. At that moment a small boy, called Junior, appeared at the door, he too must have seen the remaining eggs, “Please, Sister, may I have another egg?” Now I was in a dilemma! I had not bought the eggs so was not free to dispense with them and, moreover, there would be jealousy if I gave him another egg! “No, Junior,” I said sadly, “There might be a child who did not get an egg.” His face fell and he was about to leave the room when I suddenly thought of something, “But Junior, you are a very honest boy! You saw the remaining eggs and I would not have noticed if you had taken out another one on your own! But you know that stealing is wrong. Well done!” When I saw the little chap’s face light up at these words, I somehow felt that he was just as happy as he would have been if I had handed him an additional Easter egg! Such affirmation is important, sometimes we are quick to tell children when they do something wrong, but not so ready to praise good behaviour! Such words may remain in their minds for a long time and be remembered much later when the temptations are far more severe than the to steal a small Easter egg!

7.

Tues. 19<sup>th</sup> April

The three young boys were answering questions put to them at a family event. It was just after Easter and the family wanted to know how the children were doing in school. The first question was always, “And what Grade are you in this year?” Here are the answers given by the boys:

The first said proudly, "I am in Grade 8 this year"

The second, just as proudly, answered, "I am in Grade 4 now"

But the youngest said, "And I am in stupid old Grade 1!"

Naturally this last reply really amused the family. The third or later child in a family sometimes feels that everything exciting has already been accomplished by the time he or she comes along. At this time of the year, just going into the second term of the year, children are usually keen to get good results and are eager to succeed, though on the first day of term, they probably wish they could go on holidaying for a while! Older youngsters are, in most cases, concerned about further studies or are perhaps preparing for their first job next year. There are certainly many "new" expectations and plans. If your children are among the lucky ones who go to good schools and are probably driven to school daily by car, give a thought to those children who are not so fortunate. Think of the large number of children who roam around all year instead of being placed in a school. And what about the many post matriculants who, after twelve years of hard work, and having received a Matric pass, have no hope of either further studies or of getting a job. There are many groups working hard to place these unfortunate young people in schools or to find the older ones employment. Such groups need our support if we are in a position to lend a hand. And for the youngest in your own family, don't let them get the impression that their efforts don't count because the older ones have "done it all and got the tshirt already!! I have never had to bring up any children, but I know what a balancing act parents have to perform in order to affirm each child and not let one feel that what he/she is doing is "stupid" because others have done it before them! Let's thank God if we and our family members are well-placed for advancement in 2016, but also try to be of help to those less fortunate.

Wed. 20th April

In her beautiful book, "Seeking with all my Heart" Paula D'Arcy speaks of "Falling into the hands of the living God" (a phrase which is echoed in many of the Psalms) She writes, "It is an overwhelming experience to fall into the hands of the living God, to be invaded to the depths of one's being by His Presence, to be without warning, wholly uprooted from all earth-born securities and assurances" "Falling into the hands of the Living God" reminds me of the Psalms, but D.H. Lawrence once wrote:

"It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the Living God  
But much worse to fall out of them!"

Maybe this image may touch you as much as did me one day at prayer. The "Hands of God" are mentioned not only in the Psalms but throughout Scripture and, though we know He does not have hands as we imagine them, being a Great Spirit and not One of flesh and blood, the image is most comforting. We know from our prayer, listening to sermons or to talks on Radio Veritas or from spiritual direction that He is always open to us and this can be quite helpful in difficult times or in our prayer, but at times we may want to hide from Him as we read in Psalm 139 verse 7, "Where could I flee from your presence?" How does it happen that we want to flee from our so Loving God? Shame, fear, misunderstanding – it can be many things. But one thing is certain, His Hands are open for us to fall into and He understands us much better than we understand ourselves. Today, in your quiet place, take time to feel His loving touch and to be confident that He is very near to us at all times.

8.

Thurs. 21<sup>st</sup> April

The young girl, good Matric results in hand, was determined to be a teacher, but was having difficulty getting her parents to support her financially with the further education she would need. They were



keen to support her to carry on with her studies in order to equip herself for the future, but teaching seemed to them a dangerous path to choose. How differently teaching is viewed today as compared with how it was viewed in our youth! In those days, parents were proud to see their sons/ daughters choosing to become teachers and would give them their blessing. Today the situation is different. I once asked a 13 year old girl if she wanted to become a teacher when she left school. "Oh, no!" she replied. "And, why not?" I enquired and the answer was, "because the learners are so cruel!" I had heard of teachers being accused of meting out corporal discipline in a way that might be described as "cruel" but I this was the first time I had heard of "cruel" learners! I talked to the young aspirant teacher for quite a while and then promised to speak to her parents. There still are outstanding and dedicated teachers in many of our schools – public and private - and it is still a noble profession I told them. Most of us can remember a dedicated teacher from our own school-going days who expected the highest standards from her/his students and who never gave up on anyone in the class. In this year of Mercy, let's look to Jesus – the "teacher par excellence". One of His "students" seemed to be unsuitable to become a Preacher/Teacher in His Name, he was impulsive and often got himself into trouble through this. And his background in study was very poor – in his youth as a fisherman, he had probably seldom spent time on study. But this man, the Apostle Peter, became a brilliant preacher and his Epistles reveal his acquired prowess in writing about the Word of God. Let's pray for our young people as they try to discern their path and help them find their talent and the path along which the Lord is calling them to proceed.

Fri. 22<sup>nd</sup> April

5<sup>th</sup> Sun. Easter

This Sunday, 24<sup>th</sup> April, we celebrate the 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter. In the first Reading from Acts: 14: 21 - 27 we meet Barnabas and Paul. Of the two, Paul is much better remembered than Barnabas – although they are both saints. When reading through the Acts of the Apostles, the name Paul crops up continually and then too there are his marvellous letters. In the first years of the Church, as described in the Acts, there was a young Jew who became a Christian. His name was Joseph, but the apostles decided to name him Barnabas which meant "son of encouragement". In today's Reading from Acts, St. Paul has already been befriended by Barnabas and he certainly needs a friend! Paul had recently met Jesus on the way to Damascus and had been dramatically converted. He had changed from being a hater of Christians to being a faithful follower of Christ. But this did not assure him of being accepted by the apostles or by the other Christians. Perhaps some of their family or relations had been beaten up by Paul or they themselves had witnessed his violent antipathy towards followers of Jesus' Way. To quote from Acts 9:26; "He attempted to join the disciples, and they were all afraid of him, for they did not believe that he was a disciple" How wonderful it must have been for Paul to have a friend like Barnabas who encouraged him. In today's text we hear about how Paul and Barnabas travelled around spreading the Word. The second Reading is from the Book of Revelation 21: 1 – 5 and the Gospel from John 13: 31 – 35. In these memorable words of Jesus, spoken at the Last Supper we get to know just what Paul and Barnabas must have been telling people about Jesus. "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another even as I have loved you." I think you will find plenty to meditate and share on in these lovely Readings.

9.

Mon. 25<sup>th</sup> April

Today, the 25<sup>th</sup> April is the Feast of St. Mark, the Evangelist. I am sure that you know that there is a difference between the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke (called the Synoptic Gospels) and the

Gospel of John. Bible Scholars say that the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke are extremely similar in that they often tell the same story or parable and the writers might have used some common early source. The word "Synoptic" means "with one eye" meaning that if you put the three texts on your lap top, side by side, we would see at a glance where the similarities are. John, on the other hand, as I have mentioned before, is unique. Tradition tells us that Matthew, the converted tax collector who became one of the twelve apostles, wrote his Gospel before the other two Evangelists. He is said to have written his Gospel in Palestine in the Hebrew/ Aramaic language and that then it was translated into Greek. Luke, on the other hand (said to have been a doctor) was originally a pagan and converted to Christianity. He wrote in Greek and, since he accompanied Paul on some of his journeys, we can say that they must have shared their knowledge of Jesus' mission and agreed on the validity of the contents of Luke's Gospel.

But today is St. Mark's Feast. He was not one of the twelve apostles and never met Jesus personally, but how picturesque is his style – almost as if he had been among the crowd listening to Jesus or watching Him perform His miracles! Unlike the Gospels of Luke and Matthew, Mark does not refer to the infancy of Jesus. Mark – or John Mark - as he is named in the Acts of the Apostles, was a disciple of Peter and must have heard first-hand from that great Saint and first Pope, of what it is to know Jesus personally.

I like to think of Mark and Peter sitting together, Mark fascinated by what he was hearing and Peter so pleased to have a chance to share his great Faith in His Beloved Friend, Jesus. At the beginning of his Gospel, Mark portrays the fact that at first Jesus was widely welcomed, but, as his narration continues, we are shown that when the people realized that Jesus was not the type of Messiah that they were expecting (one who would be proud, powerful and able to overthrow the Romans) many rejected Him. This, of course, led to Calvary, which, if the people had read Isaiah correctly, was the type of Messiah Who had been foretold. Through his friendship with Peter and through reading early texts concerning Jesus, Mark came to accept Jesus as the Messiah and he proclaimed Him as such. As Mark writes at the end of his Gospel (Chapter 16 verse 20) "(Jesus) was taken up to heaven: there at the right hand of God he took his place." May St. Mark today on his Feast day, help us to honour Jesus in that exalted heavenly place, and also in our own hearts.

Tues. 26<sup>th</sup> April

"Yes, I have a sister in South Africa, but we have not spoken to each other for twenty years now. We had a quarrel and never made it up!" How often one hears such comments – maybe it is a breakdown between siblings, parents and their children or else between people who were once great friends. One parishioner I know began to speak to me about his 27 year old son who is working in Taiwan, he began calmly enough but as he spoke of the split and of how his son left for overseas without saying goodbye, his face seemed to break up and the tears ran freely down his face. I have met many such people who suffer great guilt because of some break up in their family or with other people. Of course, there are many others who consider themselves innocent and blame the other party completely. In most cases, the person concerned says that he/she never wants to see the offending one again. In either case, isn't there often a great deal of self-inflicted agony and ill-concealed guilt? We know that Pope Francis has declared 2016 to be a Holy Year of Mercy, wouldn't this be an ideal time to look again at these family feuds or other breakdowns in friendship? Maybe your attitude is: "It was all her/his fault. He/she must be the first to approach me." Well, if in the next breath, you declare that you "will never forgive him/her", there does not seem to be much chance of reconciliation! The longer these break-downs have been allowed to fester, the more difficult they are to heal. May I encourage you to bring this great rift in your relationships to Jesus, Who is as our Poster for the Year of Mercy proclaims: "Merciful like the Father." He will make the approach to the one with whom you have broken up so much easier for both of you. I am praying for you.

10.

Wed. 27<sup>th</sup> April

Freedom Day

The members of our local St. Vincent de Paul society had gone to visit a lady in our parish who had asked for a food parcel. The family is an immigrant one from the DRC. The leader of the Vincentians told me this story. The lady had given an address in Bez Valley and she and her companion found the place very easily. In front they saw an imposing house with a lovely garden, but the lady had said that she, her husband and her three small children were renting a place at the back of the house, so the group walked round to the back. There they found two rows of small recently-built dwellings, consisting of one room. Each family had access to a common room which had facilities for toilets, showers and a kitchen. Small, but thousands of people in Johannesburg live in similar conditions. After a few enquiries, they found that the family they wanted to visit lived in a row of very new-looking dwellings, built on the same lines as the first ones we had seen, but so close to the first ones, that the room was pitch dark and the people had to leave their lights on all day. The visitors went in and were offered a chair while the rest of the family sat on the one available bed. And how much did they have to pay for this dungeon-like apartment? R1,200 a month – the first payment to be made before taking up occupation and then monthly, the punishment for paying even a day late being immediate eviction.

What is your reaction? Settled South African with a stable home and income, often make one of the following comments:

1. What is wrong with their own country, ours is getting disastrously over-full and there will never be enough houses for all the people who are pouring into our South Africa.
2. They should get a job and go out to earn money so that they can get suitable accommodation.
3. The government should really do something about these landlords who make a fortune out of the suffering of the poor.....

I could think of many other reactions that I have heard to such stories, but I will stop now and leave you to come to your own conclusions. As far as I know there is no full-scale war in the DRC just now, but many people tell us that it is not really safe in some areas and those who fled when there was great tumult some years ago do not feel free to return because they are named “deserters”. One of our friends from the DRC earned money in South Africa working in people’s gardens and in the evenings studied agriculture so that he and his family could return home when he was fully-qualified and he could run a farm. He did very well in his studies and he and his family are now back in the DRC. There was no available land to buy for a farm so he bought a plot to breed poultry instead. After a little while, he was supplying eggs to many shops in the little village where the family had taken up residence. But one night the family was attacked by jealous neighbours and all the poultry were killed. I can think of one other response to this tragedy:

It goes: Too bad, we don’t have to solve all the problems in other countries, there are plenty in our own country crying out for solutions!

I agree and don’t expect you to travel to the DRC to rescue this little family, but I only suggest that you try to emulate the great Mercy of Our Heavenly Father and spare a thought and prayer for this particular family and many others like it.

Thurs. 28<sup>th</sup> April

In his encyclical on Mercy, Pope Francis writes “God never tires of forgiving us; we are the ones who tire of seeking His mercy” I thought of this recently when I was talking to a couple who had lost their son to drugs. “Lost” not in the sense of death, but in the sense that he had not been in contact with them for several years. They said they had tried desperately to get him help in his addiction while he was still at home, but that he had ignored their efforts. A few years previously, a family friend had met the young man and found that he had put himself into a home that offered rehabilitation for drug addicts and was now drug-free. The parents were delighted to get this news and had tried hard to contact their son, but he refused to come home – even for a visit. This was causing them great anxiety as they felt that they

had been a failure because he had never accepted their help. They said things like, ‘We must have made mistakes long before he got onto the drugs’ or ‘we are happy that he is clean now, but his rejection of us causes us endless heart ache’ and ‘Maybe he needs our help now – why does he not come to us?’ such self-reproach was hardly alleviated by comments from friends and relations such as ‘Leave him, he is a failure, it is not your fault’. There was little I could say to comfort them, except that he was now a grown man and they must not blame themselves but just go on praying for him. This particular story has a happy ending because I heard later that the same family friend who had found the young man, helped him to come back to Church and ask for that wondrous mercy that God offers all of us. Naturally I was not present when the son returned home and was reconciled with his loving parents, but I did hear that it had been a wonderful occasion and that he was now well on the way to managing his own life well. Let’s remember the words of Pope Francis, ‘God never tires of forgiving us, we are the ones who tire of asking Him for His mercy’

Thurs. 28<sup>th</sup> April

I started the day with great resolution – I was determined to write some ‘Thoughts for the day’ as I was behind schedule and was worried that I would not get finished by the end of the month. I did, in fact, set my lap top up and sit down to type, but something drew me to the kitchen and, on looking out, I saw a very unusual sight! Rambling round on the banks of our garden were two delightful little puppies. We have no animals and, to my knowledge, no one in our street has small puppies. This event resulted in my walking round the area in search of the owners, finding the house where they lived and taking them back.. They belonged to a family in the next street. When I looked again at my lap top, I thought of that quotation, ‘Man proposes, but God disposes!’ And, you know, I realized that holding those cuddly little puppies and finding their home had actually been a very pleasant experience! Of course, my work was even more behind by now, but what God had arranged had been very fulfilling!!! Do you ever feel constrained from attempting any different activities other than what you see as, ‘your duties’? Do you find it difficult to adjust to a timetable other than your own strictly set up one? Maybe, for today, it might be a good idea to purposely make a change and enjoy an event or task that otherwise might have not crossed your path. I am not suggesting that you neglect your duties (I still had to do my typing later on!) but that you relax in God’s rhythm for a change instead of being too strict with yourself! In Nan C. Merrill’s translation of Psalm 25, verse 4 we read:

‘Compel me to know your ways, O Love, instruct me in your paths. Lead me in your truth and teach me, for through Your will I know wholeness.’ 11.

Fri. 29<sup>th</sup> April

The month of April is drawing to a close and, with it, the Easter Season. There are only the 6<sup>th</sup> and the 7<sup>th</sup> Sundays of Easter left and they will be in May followed by the wonderful Feasts of Ascension and Pentecost. This Sunday then, 1<sup>st</sup> May, will be the 6<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter and the Readings will be Acts 15: 1 – 2, Revelation 21: 10 – 23 and the Gospel of John Chapter 14: 23 – 29. Musing through these Readings one could see them as being concerned with Jesus departure. Ascension Day this year will be celebrated on Sunday 8<sup>th</sup> May and He must have known how the Apostles dreaded the thought of His leaving them again. Someone once quipped that ‘the pleasure of saying farewell to some people can be the only pleasure of a long, boring evening’ Yes, there are leaders, relations, so-called friends and so on, whose departure is secretly welcomed! How different is the last evening, the last handshake or hug or the festive Farewell Party for someone we love. At times, we even postpone the farewell for as long as possible. What would it be like to know that Jesus in His bodily form is soon to go away! The other day someone told me very angrily that he was leaving the Catholic Church. ‘It is not at all like the Church

that Jesus founded!" he spluttered. "The Catechism teachers don't agree, Mrs. X and Mrs Y. had a public spat last Sunday... and even our parish priest....!!" Let's leave it at that, shall we? But did Jesus say, "You heard me say to you, 'I go away... but there will be complete peace in my Church, no suffering, nothing to forgive... it will be Heaven on earth except that I will not be bodily present!" Help! Please don't try to find THAT Scripture in your Bible! It isn't there (except for first nine words!) Just read today's Reading from Acts. Some of the first Christians are saying, "Unless you are circumcised, you cannot be saved" and we hear of Paul and Barnabas having "no small dissensions and debate" with these people. It must have been just like Mrs. X and Mrs Y of whom I just made mention! (Incidentally, it could just easily have been Mr. P. and Mr. Q. who had the public spat!) So, don't let's expect everything to run smoothly in the Church or even in your home. Face difficulties, try to show mercy and understanding to others, challenge them when you are sure that they are in the wrong, but listen to Jesus in the Gospel. He is aware that His going away is going to be traumatic to His loved ones, but He says, "my Father will love (you) and we will come to (you) and make our home with (you). While we are struggling with our relationships with others and find that we have forgotten all that Jesus told us about mercy, love, forgiveness, humility and the rest.. let's turn again to John 14: verse and read with relief, "These things I have spoken to you, while I am still with you that the Counsellor, the Holy Spirit,... will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you." What a wonderful promise! The Spirit will stir up our hearts to remember verse 1 of John 14: "let not your heart be troubled, neither let them be afraid."









