

**Reflection on the Gospel: 1st Sunday of Advent Year B
(Mark 13:33-37)**

-Veronica Lawson RSM

“Eyes wide open” is the proper stance for gospel people. The little parable that is the gospel reading for this first Sunday of the new liturgical year forms the conclusion to Mark’s so-called apocalyptic discourse. Apocalyptic literature emerged within Judaism in the context of crisis or persecution. It was intended to provide hope in the midst of disaster: God’s coming can reverse the sufferings of the present. The Markan discourse is delivered as a farewell teaching to the inner circle of Jesus’ disciples. The concluding verse indicates that it is intended for a wider audience, however: “what I say to you, I say to all...” Like Peter, James, and John, Christian disciples through the ages are invited to stay awake, to be on the lookout, to be alert.

This cycle of the liturgical year begins and ends with Mark 13 and a focus on the end of the present order of things. It may seem strange to begin the year with such a reflection. Is Advent not a time of preparation for Christmas, for the coming of the Christ child into the world? Mark has no account of the birth of Jesus. His gospel begins with the immediate preparation for the adult ministry of Jesus. From the very outset, his interest is in the coming of God’s reign of justice and compassion. That is, in fact, what Advent is about: living in hopeful expectation that God’s dream for a transformed world might be realised.

The parable of the watchful gatekeeper forms the conclusion to a farewell discourse that the Markan Jesus addresses to his disciples. The disciples are told to be alert and watchful through the four watches of the Roman night: in the evening, at midnight, at cockcrow, and at dawn. The parable thus foreshadows aspects of Jesus’ suffering that was to be compounded by the abandonment of his closest friends. Peter, James, and John will fall asleep in Gethsemane. The disciples will all disperse and Peter will deny him. We find our own experience mirrored in that of the disciples. It is easy to lose hope in the face of overwhelming violence and even to lose focus.

Advent is about recognising our own tendency to be less than vigilant and even to turn away when our presence is most needed. It is about allowing the grace of God to take hold in our hearts, keeping us watchful for the sake of those on the edge and for the sake of a regenerated Earth. Most of us would agree that our Earth communities are in crisis. We need to be alert to causes as well as to consequences so that the cycles of violence might eventually be broken. Our gospel asks no less of us.

Reflection on the Gospel: 2nd Sunday of Advent Year B
(Mark 1:1-8)

-Veronica Lawson RSM

The first verse of Mark's gospel evokes the opening words of Genesis and thus situates the saving presence of Jesus in relation to the creation of earth and of all earth beings. The whole of Mark's story of Jesus is presented as a beginning. It is the beginning of a faith journey into which the listener/reader is invited. In some manuscripts of the Greek text, there are only five words in this verse, seven in other manuscripts, and twelve in our English translation. The term gospel (*euangelion*) means good news. It referred originally to the news of victory delivered by a messenger, usually in time of war. The good news in this context is about Jesus, a name meaning "Yahweh saves". The reader learns that this Jesus is the Christ, the Anointed One of God, Israel's longed for Messiah. The actors within the story have to discover this truth as the drama unfolds. The two additional words present Jesus as "son of God", or as one having the characteristics of God.

John the Baptizer is identified as the messenger who proclaims the need to prepare the way for the arrival of a new Presence in our world. Mark creates the impression that something big is happening here. John draws massive crowds from city and country alike. They come to him in the wilderness, the home of the other-than-human, of diverse forms of life. At a metaphorical level, wilderness recalls Israel's experience in the Sinai desert. It is the place of testing and of new beginnings for God's people, the place of God's coming or God's "advent" to Israel. Jesus will be impelled by the Spirit into the wilderness where he will pass the tests that Israel failed.

This reading invites us to prepare for God's advent by ritualising *metanoia* (usually translated as "repentance"), and thus being ready for the one who comes. The translation "repentance" does not convey the nuances of the Greek term *metanoia* which literally means a "change of mind" and suggests an "expansion of horizons". God's advent demands a new mindset that will predispose us to receive the gift of God's forgiveness and be open to feel the pain of earth as well as the pain of those rendered poor.

Mark's depiction of John evokes the image of the prophet Elijah in 2 Kings 8 and the "hairy mantle" of the prophet in Zechariah 13:4. John is a prophet who, like the prophets of old, calls God's people to reconsider where they stand in relation to God. He is also the one who heralds the advent of the "stronger" one who will baptize "with the Holy Spirit". And yet there is nothing in the subsequent narrative about Jesus baptizing. As we reflect attentively on Mark's gospel this liturgical year, we might discover for ourselves the meaning of that reference.

**Reflection on the Gospel: 3rd Sunday of Advent Year B
(John 1:6-8, 19-28)**

-Veronica Lawson RSM

Today's gospel reading falls into two sections. The first section comprises a statement from the prologue of John's gospel and the second revolves around a question that has already been answered in the prologue. In other words, the reader knows the answer to the question posed by the characters in the second section. The prologue presents John the baptizer as "a man sent from God". He is not "the light"; he is rather a "witness" whose role is to testify to "the light". The true light [Jesus] was "coming into the world". As we proclaim Jesus as "the light", we might take time to appreciate the wonder and the properties of the material reality that informs this metaphor.

In the face of less than friendly questioning, John the baptizer responds simply and honestly to questions about his identity. The questions are relentless and John's responses are unambiguous. He is not the Messiah, the Anointed of God. He is not the prophet Elijah that some identified with God's messenger of Malachi 3:1-3 who would return and restore the "descendants of Levi" He is not the prophet-like-Moses of Deuteronomy 15. He states his identity with reference to the words of the prophet Isaiah: he is the voice crying out in the wilderness, inviting God's people to prepare the way for God's advent, God's coming.

John knows who he is. He understands the parameters of his mission and he points his questioners in the direction of the truth. His role is a pivotal one in the story of God's saving action. His story is also pivotal in the unfolding of the drama of the fourth gospel. It is worth asking how we might answer the question that the priests and Levites put to John on behalf of the Jerusalem "Jews": "Who are you?" If we can honestly answer that question, if we can admit who we are with all our strengths and weaknesses, if we can know our place in the scheme of things and own it in all humility, then we are probably in a good position to recognise and, like John, witness to the "one who is coming", the light of the world, the revelation of God.

A caution is in order regarding this gospel reading: we must remember that not only the opponents of Jesus but most of the actors in the gospel drama, including Jesus, are Jewish. The group of characters specifically named in the narrative as "the Jews" includes some influential members of the Jewish religious leadership, but cannot be identified with them because it comprises a more extensive group who are consistently in conflict with Jesus. It would be a serious disservice to the gospel to condemn the Jewish people on the basis of this and similar stories of Jewish opposition to Jesus.

**Reflection on the Gospel-4th Sunday of Advent Year B
(Luke 1:26-38)**

-Veronica Lawson RSM

We are all familiar with Luke's story of the annunciation, a story that has inspired artists through the ages. God's messenger, Gabriel, approaches a young Galilean Jewish woman, Mary of Nazareth, and greets her as God's graced one. The angel's greeting to Mary is unique. No other person in the Christian scriptures is addressed as "favoured one" or "graced one". The Greek form *kecharitōmenē* contains within it the notion of grace, *charis* in Greek. It can also mean "mercied one".

Mary is troubled by the angel's greeting, succinct as it is. After being addressed as "favoured one", she has been told only that God is with her. She knows the traditions of her people. She knows that those said to be the graced or favoured of God (Noah and Moses and Gideon and Samuel) are called to be agents of God's saving action and to carry heavy responsibilities. Now a young woman is called to be God's agent. In a formula that forms part of angelic announcements of birth, the angel tells Mary not to be afraid and reassures her by stating explicitly that she has been graced by God. The angel then proceeds to announce the conception and birth of the child she is to name "Jesus". This child will reign forever. The prophecy of Nathan, recounted in today's first reading, is to be fulfilled in the conception and birth of Mary's son who is also, and especially, God's son in the line of David who in his turn was first of many "sons of God" called to rule with the justice and the wisdom of God. In the face of almost constant failure on the part of the kings, later prophets projected Israel's hope into the future and looked for one who would truly have the characteristics of God, who would truly be "son of God".

Mary's response to the angel, "How can this be...?" echoes the prayer of David that follows today's first reading: "Who am I...and who are we that you have brought us to this point?" (2 Sam 7:18). Mary learns that God's dwelling place is her own human flesh and that this extraordinary event will be accomplished through the grace of God and the power of God's Holy Spirit. Mary is also to learn that her cousin Elizabeth will conceive a child despite her age "for nothing will be impossible for God." The mysterious workings of God in our world invite the response of Mary: "How can this be...?" As we approach the celebration of the birth of Jesus, we might pause to wonder at the goodness of God at work in the lives of all who incarnate the grace and mercy of God in our world. Let us name them, and give thanks in the spirit of today's gospel.

**Reflection on the Gospel– Feast of the Epiphany Year B
(Matthew 2:1-12)**

-Veronica Lawson RSM

God's presence is revealed to us in diverse ways: we can read the book of God's vast creation; we can search out the meaning of our dreams; we can learn from our own and others' experience; and we can listen to the voice of our sacred scriptures. Being attentive to God's presence has nothing to do with naïve dependence on our own judgment or on the judgement of others. It has more to do with a way of being in the world that involves openness to the unexpected and a critical and careful personal and communal dialogue between our life experience and our faith tradition. A deep awareness of our place in the Earth community teaches us humility. It also teaches respect for the whole of creation and for the power of the more-than-human to lead us beyond ourselves.

Epiphany is the feast of the wise ones or astrologers "from the East" who are led beyond themselves and their immediate location by the rising of a star. They form their own preliminary hypothesis and travel west to search out the meaning of this sign. They learn from the official interpreters of the Jewish scriptures, the "scribes of the people". They then follow the star that leads them to the new born child, the incarnate Wisdom of God. The gospel does not stipulate how many wise ones or magi come to pay homage to the child. There is no indication in the story as to whether they are men or women or both. The three gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh have been traditionally associated with three different characters, usually kings, of diverse nationality and colour. These strangers are the first to recognise "God-with-us" in the person of Jesus of Nazareth and to pay him homage. They also come to recognise, in a dream, the duplicity of King Herod. They have the good sense not to accede to Herod's request to "bring him word" of the newborn king. Warned once again in a dream, they return home "by another road".

The story-teller Matthew leaves room in the tableau for the insertion of the wise ones who will emerge through the ages. There is an invitation for us to enter into Matthew's drama, to be the wise ones, to join with people of diverse cultures, to engage in our own search for Wisdom, to honour the birth and the life of every child and to follow the star that leads to truth and lasting peace. There is also an invitation to be wary of self-serving rulers who find their positions threatened by the different sort of power that is based on vulnerability and openness to new life.

**Reflection on the Gospel-2nd Sunday in Ordinary Time Year B
(John 1:35-42)**

-Veronica M. Lawson RSM

A personal call to a particular a way of life is not always easy to explain, even to oneself. At my religious profession, I chose the challenging motto "To give without counting the cost". I have taken that motto seriously, even if I have often wanted to change it. Today's liturgy calls me back to what that commitment entails: I have come to realise that, in a very real sense, it encapsulates the gospel call to all the baptised.

The first reading describes a prophetic call, the "call" of the young Samuel who is to become a prophet of great stature within Israel. The story insists that God who takes the initiative while Samuel hears God's call. Initially Samuel hears the word of God, but needs an interpreter in order to understand the import of God's word to him. Eli acts as interpreter and guide, so that Samuel can respond with confidence and faith and grow up to speak God's word to the people.

The gospel focuses on the "call" to discipleship, a call that is addresses to every baptised Christian. The opening scene depicts John the Baptist with two of his disciples. John actually points the two disciples away from himself and towards Jesus whom he identifies as "the lamb of God". What does it mean to call Jesus "God's lamb"? Does the expression refer to the *Passover lamb* whose blood signifies deliverance? Is it a reference to the *Suffering Servant of Isaiah 53* who takes on the sins of the many? Is it an image of the *lamb that God provides for Abraham's sacrifice* (Genesis 22)? Is it the *apocalyptic lamb* of Jewish literature of the time, the powerful conquering lamb that destroys evil in the world? Is it intended to suggest vulnerability as in the prophecy of Jeremiah 11:19 ("I was like a *gentle lamb led to the slaughter*").

There is never a simple explanation for the symbolism in John's gospel. There can be many levels of meaning at the one time. The symbol of strength in vulnerability certainly has potential for understanding who Jesus is in this gospel. John 1:29 tells us that the Lamb of God "takes away" the sinful condition of the world. Twenty-one centuries down the track there is still violence and hunger and exploitation of planetary resources on a massive scale. The work of the one strong enough to risk vulnerability so that others may have life, the work of God's Lamb, is also the work of disciples. It is the way of those who hear God's call and choose to walk the way of Jesus of Nazareth, in openness and love for God's people. The call to discipleship is a call to pour out one's lifeblood for the sake of the gospel, "to give without counting the cost".

**Reflection on the Gospel-3rd Sunday in Ordinary Time Year B
(Mark 1:14-20)**

-Veronica Lawson RSM

Most of the gospel readings for this year are from Mark's story of Jesus. As with any story, it is best to read it from beginning to end, attending to the story line, to indications of place and time, to all the actors or characters in the story, human and other-than-human. While the main character or actor is Jesus, there are other characters and character groups that claim our attention. The "worlds" we encounter include the celestial world, the world of spirits and demons, the human, the animal and the plant worlds. In many ways, we can resonate with the worlds that Mark creates. In other ways, they are alien to 21st century scientific sensibilities. We bring our consciousness of these differences to our reading of the text. As we embark on this reading we might also become aware of what we bring to the text, "the joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties" (GS 1) of our world today. What we bring to the text informs our understanding of the text.

As we read, we might think of this gospel as a two-act drama. The first act in the drama (Mark 1:1-8:26) raises the question, "Who is this?" The central scene (Mark 8:27-30) provides a partial answer: Jesus is the Messiah or God's Anointed One, the Christos. The second act of the drama (Mark 8:31-16:8) is full of surprises for its earliest audiences: Jesus is not a militaristic messiah, but one who is prepared to suffer death for the sake of God's empire; God finally triumphs over suffering and death.

The invitation to us as readers is to enter into the drama, to identify with the characters and character groups, and to hear the teachings of Jesus. In the passage selected for today, Jesus announces his program and invites others to reorient their lives, to expand their horizons and to join him on a mission of proclaiming God's kin-dom, God's way of being in the world. Jesus proclaims the advent of God's "time" or *kairos*, as opposed to ordinary clock time (*chronos*). It is crisis time, time to attend to the cries of the earth and the cries of those rendered poor in every age.

One might get the impression that the disciples are all men. We have to go to the end of the gospel to find that there are also women "who came up with him to Jerusalem" from Galilee. The central section of the gospel (Mark 9-10) makes it clear that there are children on the journey as well. So let us imagine a much more extended group around Jesus than today's little gospel reading suggests. Women, men, and children, all are invited to leave behind whatever gets in the way of bringing God's empire into our world.

**Reflection on the Gospel-4th Sunday in Ordinary Time Year B
(Mark 1:21-28)**

-Veronica Lawson RSM

Today's gospel reading recounts the first episode in a section of Mark's gospel that focusses on a typical day in the ministry of Jesus as authoritative teacher and prophetic healer (1:21-38). Jesus comes with his disciples to Capernaum. On the Sabbath day, Judaism's holy day, he goes into the synagogue, Judaism's local gathering place, and preaches. The verbal forms in the first sentence indicate that teaching in the synagogue was part of his customary activity. Jesus is thus located firmly within Israel's prophetic tradition of mediating God's word.

In today's first reading from Deuteronomy (18:15-20), the term "prophet" appears eight times. Moses tells the people that God will respond to their request at Sinai (Horeb) and raise up from among them a prophet like himself, a mediator between God and God's people, one who will speak God's word. Prophets do not appoint or authorise themselves: God calls and authorises the prophets to speak God's word. Failure to heed the prophets carries its own consequences as does the attempt to assume a prophetic role without God's authorisation. Just as the prophets of old speak the authentic word of God only when they are authorised by the God of Israel, so Jesus of Nazareth, later to identify himself in this gospel as God's prophet (6:4), speaks and acts "with authority". In other words, he speaks with the authority of the God of Israel.

In this first Markan story of his divinely authorised activity, Jesus is approached by a man "with an unclean spirit". The man's loud scream sets up a confrontation between the power of God, mediated through Jesus, and the forces of destruction that often take hold of human lives. Jesus silences and expels these destructive forces and thus renders a seriously troubled person whole. Confounding the unclean spirit(s) brings social and communal benefits to the troubled person as well as physical and emotional healing.

God's reign or empire is made real through a healing action that is perceived as "a new teaching". No word of Jesus' teaching is reported, only his actions. Those actions are presented as "teaching". We teach by who we are and what we do. For Jesus, as for his disciples, congruence between words and actions is integral to authentic gospel proclamation.

Jesus is demonstrating to his newly formed group of followers that the gospel they are to proclaim is grounded in the ordinary struggles of ordinary people. This gospel carries the power to lift the burdens and restore the troubled to wholeness and health. We may wish to identify the "unclean spirits" that take hold of us from time to time so that we can open ourselves to the power of God mediated through God's teacher-healers in our time.

**Reflection on the Gospel-5th Sunday in Ordinary Time Year B
(Mark 1:21-28)**

-Veronica Lawson RSM

In the Mediterranean world of the first century, sickness was attributed to social rather than physical causes. The corollary of this was that healing focussed principally on restoration of the person to her or his place or status in the society or community rather than on the person's bodily affliction or dysfunction. In a very real sense, the healing of an individual brought not only the person but the community itself to wholeness.

Last Sunday, we reflected on the "healing" of a man with an "unclean spirit". Jesus, healer and teacher, expelled the unclean spirit and thus restored health to the man and to the worshipping community. The healing took place in the Capernaum synagogue on the Sabbath. This story began Mark's account of a typical day in Jesus' ministry. Today's gospel passage continues that account. Jesus leaves the synagogue and moves, in the company of two of his new disciples, to the house of Simon and Andrew. In other words, he shifts from a long established gathering place for God's people, the synagogue, to a prospective new locus of communal engagement, the house church. This new locus does not preclude the older locus: Jesus continues to teach and heal in the synagogues throughout Galilee.

In this new place of encounter with God, Jesus heals a woman with a "fever" who is identified only in relation to her son-in-law, Simon. Jesus takes her by the hand and raises her up. She is the first human character in the Markan gospel story who is said to "minister". In other words, the love of God working through Jesus draws her beyond herself to engage in a ministry of leadership in the community of God's people. A little earlier in Mark's gospel we heard that angels "ministered" to Jesus in the desert. In other words, God looked after Jesus as he embarked on his mission of bringing God's love into a broken world. Later in the gospel, Jesus insists that he came "not to be served but to serve/minister" (10:45). This woman is caught up in the same mission of bringing the community to health and wholeness.

That same evening, Simon's house becomes a magnet for "the whole city". Jesus heals their sick and afflicted and, early in the morning, he seeks the solitude of a "desert" place for prayer. The disciples seek him out, as everyone is looking for him. Jesus makes it clear to them that he must move on and bring God's word and healing beyond the city to the neighbouring Galilean towns. The message is for us as well as for those early disciples. Amid all the demands of a sometimes frenetic program, we too must search out the solitude of a "desert" place for prayer, and engage with renewed energy and insight in whatever the new day brings.

Reflection on the Gospel–6th Sunday in Ordinary Time Year B
(Mark 1:40-45)

-Veronica Lawson RSM

We all seek to be part of family and community because we are social beings who need to engage with others and with our environment. Some are deprived of choice in this respect, in our times as in ancient times. Repeated name-calling and labelling is an age-old strategy of exclusion. “Illegals” is a label that excludes some of the most vulnerable people in today’s world. “Leper” is a label that is used metaphorically of those who are not welcome, of those deemed to be “infectious”. Today’s gospel about a man with leprosy invites us to reflect on the pain of exclusion.

To be a leper in the world of early Judaism was to have some sort of skin disease that excluded a person from community and in particular from public worship. There were very strict regulations regarding such lepers (see the first reading from Leviticus, dating from several centuries before the time of Jesus). Their condition required ritual cleansing by a priest and an offering that cost money. That seems horrifying from our perspective, and it was.

In Mark’s story, the man with leprosy approaches Jesus of Nazareth who is not one of the priests. This afflicted person thus cuts across the established procedures. Jesus is “moved with compassion”, literally “moved in his gut, or in the depths of his being”. In other words, Jesus empathises deeply with the suffering person. He has a physical reaction in the face of suffering. Some manuscripts have “moved with anger”. A later scribe probably considered that expression too harsh as an emotion for Jesus and softened the text.

Jesus speaks and acts. He declares that he wills the cure of the man. He actually reaches out and touches him: a bodily encounter brings healing. He then sends the man back to tell the priests “as a proof to them”. The verb used for “send back” suggests that the priests had already been approached without success. Jesus, the Galilean healer, succeeds in mediating the power of the God of Israel and so restores this outcast to life in the community and the community itself to greater wholeness through this healing. The widespread report of Jesus’ healing activity will incur the anger of some of the authorities.

For our part, as followers of Jesus, we might reflect on the fact that sickness and disability are not only physical phenomena. They also have social and emotional impacts on individuals and the communities to which they belong. Healing enables people to live again, to be with others, to do the things they want to do. It brings new life and integrity to community. Jesus demonstrates that the combination of a compassionate word and a healing touch can work wonders. That was true in the ancient world. It is equally true for us today.

**Reflection on the Gospel-1st Sunday in Lent Year B
(Mark 1:12-15)**

-Veronica Lawson RSM

Lent comes around each year and presents us with its usual challenge to take stock of our lives, to see more clearly what is in our hearts, and to discover what might be calling us out of our comfort zones. It is a time to consider how we might respond to the pain of the world and of its inhabitants. It is a time for personal as well as group reflection, a time for entering into “the wilderness” and for grappling with the mysteries of life. It is a time of preparation for Easter when we will renew our baptismal vows and celebrate the greatest mysteries of our faith.

The gospel reading invites us to reflect on Jesus’ forty-day experience in “the wilderness”. Jesus is said to be “filled with the Holy Spirit” and, like so many human beings before and since, is “led by the Spirit” into the wilderness of life to be “tested” there. [“Tested” is a more accurate translation of the original Greek term than is “tempted”]. Forty is a symbolic number in Israel’s story: the great flood lasts forty days and forty nights; Moses spends forty days and forty nights on the mountain of God; Israel wanders for forty years in the wilderness; King David reigns for forty years; the prophet Elijah travels forty days and forty nights in the wilderness on his way to the mountain of God.

The wilderness of Judah, with its unique desert flora and fauna, its wadis and waterholes, is ever so real. At the same time it functions symbolically in the narrative. In Israel’s story, it is the place of testing for God’s people: “Remember the long way that your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness... testing you to know what was in your heart” (Deuteronomy 8:2). Jesus now passes the tests that Israel failed in the wilderness.

Jesus is “with the wild beasts”. This terse statement recalls the prophet Isaiah’s vision of a future time of reconciliation and harmony when “the wolf will lie down with the lamb” (Isaiah 11:6-9). Jesus is presented as the one who ushers in that age of peace and healing of division. God’s agents care for him in his time of testing: “angels minister to him”. In this context, Jesus announces the coming of God’s empire or reign. His message is to “repent” or to “think beyond” in a way that might turn lives around in God’s direction, and to “believe the good news” that he is set to proclaim in word and action. At a time of growing divide between the mega-rich and the desperately poor, we might look back to our symbolic tradition and forward to ways of bringing good news to those mostly deeply affected by the inequities in our world.

Reflection on the Gospel-2nd Sunday of Lent Year B
(Mark 9:2-10)

-Veronica Lawson RSM

The wilderness was the geographical and key symbolic focus of last week's gospel story. This week, the focus is a mountain. Wilderness and mountain remind us that God's Earth itself is the locus of mystery and grace, the place of Earth-divine encounter. The mountain, like the wilderness, links Mark's story of Jesus with the story of the Israelites. Moses' encounter with God on the mountain of Sinai was a defining moment in the life of the people: the Israelites entered into covenant with God at this mountain and received the Law that was to guide their lives as a people. Some centuries later, at a time of crisis in Israel's life, the prophet Elijah returned to this mountain and experienced the presence of God in the gentle breeze.

In the gospel passage for today, Jesus takes Peter, James and John up the mountain and is "transfigured" before them and "his clothes become dazzling white". In the Book of Revelation, white clothes come to symbolise the clothing of martyrs, of those who die for their faith. Elijah and Moses, the key prophetic figures of Israel, appear and enter into dialogue with Jesus, God's definitive prophet. The "transfiguration" seems to point to a time in Jesus' ministry when he accepts his likely fate. If he continues to challenge oppression and injustice, he is certain to encounter opposition, even death. He struggles with that realisation in the "wilderness" and comes to terms with what it involves on this unidentified mountain.

The voice of God reaffirms the identity of Jesus that was announced in the opening words of the gospel and proclaimed at his baptism in the Jordan. It calls for a response from the disciples who have ascended the mountain in his company: "Listen to him". In the two preceding scenes, Jesus has spoken of the suffering that he and his followers will have to face. These words are crucial to an understanding, not only of Jesus, but of what it means to follow him. They seem to fall on deaf ears.

Peter wants to hold on to the experience of glory, to "make tents" and settle down. He prefers not to face the difficulties involved in fidelity to the mission. But that is not the way of discipleship. Like Jesus and his companions, we too need the occasional glimpse of final victory. We also need the courage and the good sense to return from the mountain and follow through on the path that brings life, despite the pain. We can feel overwhelmed by the enormity of the challenges facing us and by the opposition we sometimes experience. If we are to maintain the struggle for a sustainable, safe, and peace-filled world, we have to "listen" to the invitation of Jesus and come to terms with the personal and communal costs involved in a gospel way of life

**Reflection on the Gospel-3rd Sunday of Lent Year B
(John 2:13-25)**

-Veronica Lawson RSM

Today's gospel passage foreshadows the death of Jesus. As a devout Jew, Jesus goes up to Jerusalem at Passover. His final going-up will be the occasion of his death and resurrection. The Jerusalem Temple, Judaism's most holy place, is the site of a dramatic incident, an event that is recounted in all four gospels. The Synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke) locate it towards the end of the gospel. They present it as a catalyst for the intensification of hostility between the temple authorities and Jesus. John's gospel, in contrast, places it at the beginning of Jesus' ministry. The tension between Jesus and the temple authorities that is to culminate in his death in all four gospels is thus present from the outset in John.

Jesus acts decisively, even violently, to draw attention to the primary function of God's "house". He creates an effective weapon, a whip of cords, and comprehensively clears the temple precinct of merchants, sheep, and cattle. He overturns the tables of the money-changers, orders the dove-sellers out and tells them all, in words that evoke the prophecy of Zechariah (14:21), to stop making God's house "a market-place". Zechariah had declared that, in the end times, there would no longer be traders in God's house. There was legitimate commercial activity associated with temple worship, such as the purchase of animals and doves for sacrifice, a practice we might now critique, and the conversion of money to pay the Temple tax. The traders seem to have forgotten that this activity was a means to an end and not an end in itself.

In John's account, the disciples partially understand: they interpret Jesus' actions in the light of Psalm 69:9: "It is zeal for your house that has consumed me". "The Jews" request a "sign ... for doing this". In other words, they ask Jesus to demonstrate the source of his authority for his actions. His response is a challenge: "Destroy this temple, and in three days, I will raise it up". "The Jews" misunderstand. This provides Jesus with the opportunity to play on the word "temple": the temple is not simply a material edifice that took forty-six years to build. It is his body that will be destroyed and raised up "in three days". The narrator provides the explanation and indicates that the disciples will eventually understand and come to belief. It is important to note that the designation "the Jews" is neither a reference to the people of Judaea nor to the dispersed Jewish people. In John's gospel, it refers to those who reject Jesus as the Anointed One of God, the Christ. As we travel the journey to Jerusalem this Lent, we are invited to keep everything in balance, and to remember that God, and not the opponents of Jesus, will have the final word in this drama.

**Reflection on the Gospel-4th Sunday of Lent Year B
(John 3:14-21)**

-Veronica Lawson RSM

The gospel for today is the concluding section of Jesus' conversation with a Pharisee called Nicodemus, who comes to him "by night". It features a number of typically Johannine themes: life, eternal life, believing, seeing, God's love, salvation, judgment, light, darkness, the world, truth. John loves to play on words. Without losing sight of the material reality underlying each image, we need to keep asking: how is this word or expression to be understood in this particular context? In John's gospel, the characters often misunderstand and this gives Jesus the opportunity to lead his hearers to a deeper or different understanding of his words.

As 21st century readers, we operate out of a symbol system that belongs in a different time and a different place, hence the need to explore the traditions informing the stories. The first two verses of today's reading evoke the ancient Israelite tradition of the bronze serpent (Numbers 21:5-9). According to the story, the Israelites are unhappy with their lot in the desert. They complain about the food or lack thereof. They blame both God and Moses. Their situation worsens with the outbreak of a plague of poisonous snakes whose bite has killed a considerable number of them. The people interpret the plague as punishment for their sin of speaking against God. They ask Moses to intercede with God. God instructs Moses to make an image of a fiery serpent and set it on a pole: anyone affected by snakebite has only to look upon the image to find life and healing. And so it happens: the bronze serpent is lifted up and those who "see" or "look upon it" find life.

Life and death, seeing and believing in God's love and mercy are at the heart of the story of the bronze serpent. The gospel writer taps into the collective memory of the emerging Christian community: just as the serpent was lifted up and the people found life, so will Jesus be lifted up and those who believe in him will find life. In John's gospel, seeing is often equated with believing and believing leads to "life".

The bottom line is God's saving love for "the world", for the whole Earth community. Most of the themes in this passage have already been introduced in the prologue to the gospel. Here for the first time in the gospel, God's saving activity is expressed in terms of "love". God's love is explicitly related to the gift of Jesus, God's Son, for the salvation of the world. Salvation resides in acceptance of Jesus, judgment in the refusal to accept Jesus as the revelation of God. Later in this gospel (12:33), Jesus will again reference the bronze serpent story in an expansive embrace of all creation: "And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all to myself."

**Reflection on the Gospel-5th Sunday of Lent Year B
(John 12:20-33)**

-Veronica Lawson RSM

Today's gospel tells us that among those who go up to Jerusalem to worship at the feast of Passover are some "Greeks". The reference is probably to a group known in the early church as "God-fearers", although that designation is found only in Luke's second volume, the Acts of the Apostles. These people were a bit like RCIA candidates in relation to Judaism. They were certainly interested in Judaism and, because of their active interest in the Jewish faith and traditions, were possibly better informed about many of the Jewish traditions than those who had been members of the Jewish community all their lives. God-fearers seem to have been among the first Gentiles (non-Jews) to join the early Christian Jewish movement, i.e. the Jews who accepted Jesus as Messiah (or Christ).

For Jesus, the arrival of these God-fearing Greeks signals his "hour". Earlier in John's gospel, Jesus has insisted that his "hour" had not yet come. Now that his message receives global acknowledgement, or in the words of the Pharisees, now that "the world has gone after him" (John 20:19), he can announce that the hour of his glorification has come. Characteristically, Jesus uses a potent agricultural image to capture the transformative nature of his imminent death: like the grain of wheat, he must go into the earth and die in order to bear fruit. The same is true for his followers: to be concerned only with self-preservation is to "lose" one's life; to give one's life is to "keep it for eternal life".

Although the language is more explicit in John, the grain of wheat image echoes some aspects of the first reading from the prophet Jeremiah (31:31-34). Jeremiah presents the God of Israel as One who forgives and who is even prepared to forget the sins of the past. The people will be God's garden: the seed planted within them is God's Law. They will be God's own billboard: the law of forgiveness and mercy will be written in their hearts. John uses the "eternal life" metaphor in much the same way as the other gospel writers use the "reign of God" or "kin-dom" image. To keep one's life for "eternal life" has to do with living God's transformative vision for creation in the present so that it might one day be fully realised.

In John's gospel, Jesus' death is also his being lifted up in glory. The moment of his death becomes the moment of drawing "all" to himself. The "all" includes all people, but is not restricted to the human community. It also allows for an ecological interpretation: in his death and exaltation, Jesus gathers the whole Earth community into the mystery of God's redemptive and transforming love.

Reflection on the Gospel-Passion/Palm Sunday Year B
(Mark 11:1-10; Mark 14:1-15:47)

-Veronica Lawson RSM

Mark 11:1-10

Mark's account of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem is more restrained and less victorious in tone than the other gospel accounts. In keeping with Mark's gospel as a whole, it forms part of the relentless journey of Jesus, the suffering Messiah, towards Jerusalem the place of his death. The longed-for liberation will come about in Jerusalem, through powerlessness, suffering and death rather than through the exercise of might and power.

Mark 14:1-15:47

The gospel account of the suffering and death of Jesus opens with the story of an insightful but unnamed woman who pours out healing ointment on the head of Jesus. We might reflect on the Eucharistic character of her actions of breaking and pouring and of Jesus' assurance that what she has done will be told in memory of her. She did "what she could". The story of her support for Jesus is sandwiched between two stories of opposition: an assassination plot on the part of the religious authorities, and the foreshadowing of Jesus' betrayal at the hands of a close follower. Status does not guarantee goodness or insight.

As the story unfolds, we hear that, despite his earlier instruction to "stay awake", Jesus' closest followers fall asleep when he most needs them. Worse than that, they betray, deny, and abandon him. Some Galilean women remain faithful. They have followed him and looked after him on the long journey from Galilee to Jerusalem. They become witnesses to his death and burial. These women will also discover the empty tomb and take the message of the resurrection to the male disciples. A foreign passer-by, Simon, whose sons are known to the Markan community, shoulders part of the burden. An ordinary Roman soldier realises and proclaims that Jesus is of God.

The story has come full circle: the first verse of the gospel announced the beginning of the good news of Jesus, the Christ and the Son of God. Now the reader understands what it means to make such a proclamation. The final chapter is to be celebrated next weekend. The mystery is to be lived every day of every week. As we enter into the holiest week of the liturgical year, we might consider our call to bring the power of Christ's redeeming love to those who suffer crucifixion in our own times: the more-than-human Earth community that suffers the effects of climate change; the desperate asylum seekers who remain on Manus Island and Nauru; the war-torn lands of Yemen and Syria.

For stories of hope in the face of despair, you may like to visit the Mercy Works website (mercyworks.org.au). It is all too easy to deny, betray, and abandon the suffering other. Like the woman who poured out the healing ointment on the head of Jesus, we also must do what we can.

**Reflection on the Gospel-Easter Vigil Year B
(Mark 16:1-8)**

-Veronica Lawson RSM

At the foot of Mt Macedon, where I spent the first sixteen years of my life, stands the lovely Anglican Church of the Resurrection, built in the aftermath of the devastating 1983 Ash Wednesday bushfires. Members of both Catholic and Anglican communities had wanted to build one church for the two communities but the respective insurance policies determined otherwise: two churches replaced the two that were destroyed in the fires. The most striking feature of the Anglican Church is Leonard French's stained glass depiction of the resurrection experience of a devastated community, a statement of hope in the face of death and seeming hopelessness. Macedon has risen from the ashes and is once again a vibrant community. The Church of the Resurrection serves as a reminder of the community's faith and provides a context for "re-membering" events that united its members in unexpected ways. In a particularly graphic way, it brings the lower-key experience of the local community into dialogue with its upper-key Story of the death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth.

We take time at Easter to re-member, re-enact, and re-tell the originating stories of our tradition. We dramatise and celebrate in solemn ritual what we celebrate in lower key every Sunday of the year. In our faith inspired re-telling, all the power and grace of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus are made present to us and to our world. Resurrection faith is a commitment to life.

In Mark's resurrection account (Mark 16:1-8), the place of death, the tomb, lies empty and the message of life is proclaimed. The young man, God's messenger, sends the women who have witnessed the death and burial of Jesus to proclaim the news of his resurrection to the male disciples. Some interpret the silence of the women as failure. Others see it as the appropriate stance before the wonder of God's power. The gospel narrative itself bears witness to a mission ultimately accomplished.

The ongoing wars in Syria and South Sudan, the climate displacement of peoples from the Marshall and Carteret Islands and the devastation caused by multiple earthquakes and consequent landslides in Papua New Guinea foreground the language of death and resurrection at this time. As we enter into the Easter mysteries, we carry with us the chaos of broken communities, human and more-than-human. We mourn the deaths of thousands, we pray for order out of the chaos, we ask questions about the human contribution even to the earthquakes and we do all we can to ensure a real return to life for the bereaved, the struggling and the displaced. We join with those who are sharing their resources and re-ordering their own way of being in the Earth community in order to make this happen.

**Reflection on the Gospel-2nd Sunday of Easter B
(John 20:19-31)**

-Veronica Lawson RSM

Some of us may remember when we spoke of the Sundays *after* Easter. The terminology has changed and we now speak of the Sundays *of* Easter. In other words, we now recognise that the liturgical readings and prayers for each Sunday between Easter and Pentecost invite us into a different movement of the one great symphony of resurrection faith.

The first scene in today's gospel has the disciples hiding behind closed doors "for fear" of those who had handed Jesus over to be executed by the Roman authorities. Jesus appears among them, offers a greeting of peace, and tells them that he has been sent by God, his "Father". They receive from him the gift of the Holy Spirit. He sends them in turn to bring peace and to mediate the forgiveness of God through the power of the Spirit. In other words, he sends them to create communities of people who listen to one another and who love one another into life. The story invites us as believers to place ourselves in the shoes of the earliest disciples. It invites us to receive the gift of the Spirit, to emerge from behind the doors that close us in on ourselves and that prevent us from rising above the fears that control and even paralyse us. We render the gospel ineffective, even powerless, when we make self-protection our priority.

The second and third scenes in today's gospel focus on Thomas who is not with the other disciples when Jesus first appears in their midst. Thomas is not exactly the trusting type. He seems to trust only his own first hand experience. We all know people like Thomas. They test our patience because they seem to lack imagination. Then they make big statements when they come around to understanding what everyone else has known for a while. If we think, however, that the other disciples are any better than Thomas, we need to note that the doors are still closed eight days down the track! The simple fact of knowing has not dispelled the fears.

Even those of us who do believe and trust need a bit of time and encouragement to take the gospel message to heart. We often need the example and support of others to move out beyond our fears and embrace the pain of the wider world. We may do well to look back to today's first reading from Acts (2:32-35) where Luke presents an idealised picture of the post resurrection Jerusalem community: all things in common and the gospel received with great respect. We respond with love and generosity in times of crisis. How can we continue to live the gospel message from death through resurrection and into "ordinary time"?

**Reflection on the Gospel- 3rd Sunday of Easter Year B
(Luke 24:35-48)**

-Veronica Lawson, RSM

Extraordinary things can happen if we open ourselves to the presence of a stranger on the road of life. That is one of the elements in today's gospel that forms the conclusion to the Emmaus story. When I was a student at Trinity College in Dublin researching Luke's depiction of women in the Acts of the Apostles, I would often take a detour on my way home to visit the National Gallery of Ireland. Velázquez' remarkable oil painting, *Kitchen Maid with the Supper at Emmaus* captured and held my attention. We have here a painting within a painting. The kitchen maid pauses from her tasks to listen, through the window between kitchen and dining area, to the conversation between Jesus and his table companions. His hosts have not yet recognised the companion they had encountered on the road from Jerusalem. Velázquez seems to be suggesting that the young servant woman in the foreground, a woman from another place and another time, has sensed what they have still to discover.

Imagine two dejected disciples (Cleopas and possibly his wife) on the road from Jerusalem to their home in Emmaus. On their journey, they encounter Jesus who has been raised. At first, they fail to recognise him. Their sadness at his death has blinded them to what is happening before their very eyes. He engages them in conversation and holds up a metaphorical mirror to their experience of loss and grief. Their hearts "burn" within them as he opens to them the meaning of their sacred scriptures. They invite him to share a meal with them and their eyes are opened: they recognise him in the breaking of the bread. Jesus then disappears from their midst. They cannot contain the joy they have experienced in realising that he is alive.

Cleopas and partner go straight back to Jerusalem to share the good news with the other disciples. Now all the assembled disciples experience powerfully the presence of Jesus in their midst. They share a meal with him. He opens their minds to understand the scriptures. Everything falls into place. They not only understand Jesus' death and resurrection in the light of the scriptures. They now know that they will be "clothed with power from on high" to exercise their role as witnesses to this great mystery, and to preach forgiveness to all peoples "beginning from Jerusalem".

Luke will open the Acts of the Apostles with the story of Jesus sending the disciples to be his witnesses to the ends of the earth. We who re-member these events in every Eucharistic celebration are both the recipients and the bearers of that message. If we allow our hearts to "burn" within us, we too may recognise the Risen One in our gatherings and become his witnesses to the ends of the earth.

**Reflection on the Gospel-4th Sunday of Easter Year B
(John 10:11-18)**

-Veronica Lawson RSM

This year we celebrate World Earth Day on Good Shepherd Sunday. The liturgy invites us to reflect on Jesus as the noble or good shepherd of the believing community. "Shepherd" in its literal sense is not really part of our 21st century vocabulary, and yet we use it metaphorically, as a verb or as a noun. Its verbal form connotes care and compassion, protection, guidance and tender relationship. In John's gospel, Jesus rightly claims for himself the title "good shepherd". He contrasts the good shepherd or leader with the leader that fails to care for the flock. Knowing one's sheep, staying with them in the face of mortal danger and being prepared to die for them are marks of the good shepherd.

There are echoes here of the Hebrew Scriptures, particularly of Ezekiel 34 where the "shepherd/sheep" metaphor describes the leaders of Israel in their relationships with the people. There are likewise echoes of an early second century description of the Emperor Tiberius in whose reign Jesus of Nazareth was executed, precisely because he did not abandon his "flock". The Roman historian Suetonius has this to say of Tiberius: "To the governors who recommended burdensome taxes for his provinces, he wrote in answer that it was the part of a good shepherd to shear his flock, not skin it" (Suetonius, *Life of Tiberius* 32.2).

In the pre-industrial biblical world and early centuries of the Common Era, the "shepherd/sheep" metaphor was heard by an audience that enjoyed a much closer relationship with sheep and their human carers than do most people today. In my country, for instance, there are 71 million sheep and almost 25 million people. In other words, the ovine inhabitants of Australia outnumber the human by almost three to one. Yet most of our highly urbanised human population knows its sheep only in their disembodied forms. The human-ovine relationship is, for the most part, reduced to that of consumer and consumed. Sheep are valued, not for their intrinsic goodness as creations of a loving God, but rather as commodities that provide food and clothing for the human population. We now know that modern domesticated sheep evolved from creatures that pre-date modern humans. We might take time to consider the implications of this for our relationship with the other-than-human inhabitants of our planetary home.

Celebrating World Earth Day on Good Shepherd Sunday provides us with an opportunity to move beyond our human-centred views of the world and our human-centred interpretations of our sacred texts. We might hear a call to value the realities that underpin gospel images such as the Good Shepherd/sheep metaphor. We might also hear a call to expand our appreciation of all the inhabitants of our planet. To be good shepherds in our time is to embrace the whole Earth Community with reverence and compassion.

**Reflection on the Gospel-5th Sunday of Easter Year B
(John 15:1-8)**

-Veronica Lawson RSM

Again and again, life's experiences teach us that, as members of the Earth community, we cannot make it on our own. We need one another, other living beings, the sun, the soil, the water and everything else that formed from exploding stars in the distant past. The gospel reading reminds us that as baptised Christians we are not just intimately interlinked but that the source of our unity is the Risen Christ. As limbs and leaves and sap of the same vine, we simply cannot survive in isolation.

The vine image picks up one of the most potent biblical images for God's relationship to the people of Israel. It is an image of life and growth, of colour and vibrancy. It holds the promise of a life-sustaining grape harvest that is ultimately transformed into wine, the biblical symbol for joy. God brought Israel "the vine" out of Egypt (Psalm 80:9). For the prophet Isaiah, Israel is also a vineyard planted and nurtured by God (5:1-7; 27:3). For Jeremiah, Israel is the choice vine "of fully tested stock" planted by God (2:21).

The Johannine Jesus makes the claim: "I am the true vine/vineyard" and God is the "vinegrower". He goes further: "I am the vine/vineyard and you are the branches". The potency of this image resides in the fact that a vine without branches is inconceivable. It draws us into the mystery of the mutual interchange of life between us and the risen Christ, into the mystery of God. It also invites us to acknowledge our interconnection with the whole of the Earth community, to nurture the wonderful biodiversity of our planet, and to accept the inevitability of "pruning" if we are to "bear fruit" and "become disciples".

"Pruning" can take various forms. A chance encounter, a sudden inspiration, a word from a friend, an unexpected illness, a confronting story: any such experience can bring us to our senses and serve as a "pruning" device. The first reading for today recounts the story of Saul of Tarsus who is "pruned" quite dramatically through his encounter with the Risen Christ on the road to Damascus. He is transformed from persecutor to defender of Christ and Christ's followers. Saul becomes a disciple and "bears much fruit". The Greek-speaking Christian Jews are suspicious, even murderous, when he tries to preach the gospel among them. Peace ensues, however, and the movement takes hold in the regions where Jesus had first preached the gospel. It is worth reflecting on the cultural diversity that characterised earliest Christianity and the tensions that had to be resolved between different language groups or groups of different ethnic origin for the gospel to flourish and bear fruit. John's gospel is written against the backdrop of such "pruning" within the early communities. Sometimes the requisite "pruning" is hearing respectfully a point of view that differs from one's own.

**Reflection on the Gospel-6th Sunday of Easter Year B
(John 15:9-17)**

-Veronica Lawson RSM

The constitutions of my religious institute remind me that “the tender mercy of our God has given us one another”. The implications of this profoundly beautiful truth are spelt out thus: “In our communities, we try to live in the friendship of Christ’s disciples [Jn 15:15]. To so live calls forth relationships of equality, a real acceptance of ourselves and others, a forgetfulness of anything that does not make love its message.” Living in the friendship of Christ’s disciples is at the heart of a gospel way of living. It is the commission at the heart of today’s reading and seems to be exactly what Pope Francis wants to say to all believers in his new Apostolic Exhortation, *Gaudete et Exultate* (Rejoice and be Glad).

As we listen to the proclamation of the gospel, we might attend to the repetition of “joy”, the three-fold repetition of “friends” and the nine-fold repetition of “love”. We might attend to the way in which the pronouns I/my/me and you/your function in the passage. We may also notice the reference to “commands” and “commandments”.

We tend not to associate “commands” with friendship and love because those we count as our friends are not usually in the habit of commanding or ordering us to do what they want. We derive little joy from being told what to do. And yet, there is no resiling from the juxtaposition of these terms. God, imaged in the gospel passage as “Father”, loves Jesus. Jesus remains or abides in God’s love so deeply that this love flows on to his friends. They are to love one another as Jesus has loved them. This is his commandment or commission to them, and by extension to us. It directs them/us to live for each other and put their lives/our lives on the line for one another. It means being faithful to the teaching of Jesus as he has been faithful to God’s commandments.

Remaining in the love of God or of Jesus and doing what God or Jesus commands seem to be one and the same thing. In other words, love is not just an emotion: it is always expressed in action that is in tune with and for the sake of the other. The disciples need no further explanation. Jesus’ whole life and his courage in the face of impending death have shown them what it means to love one another.

Living in the friendship of Christ’s disciples is not some abstract goal. Too often we affirm the goodness of our selfless companions on the journey only when we come to lay them to rest. As we approach the end of the Easter season, we might give thanks for the love of our friends, for their witness to holiness and for the joy that they bring to our lives.

Reflection on the Gospel-Feast of the Ascension Year B

(Mark 16:15-20)

-Veronica Lawson RSM

The feast of the Ascension invites us to face the universal experience of the loss of a loved one, and to face it in a transformative way. In Ordinary Time, we celebrate the life and ministry of Jesus. Over the period of Lent and Easter, we have been re-membering his death and resurrection. The liturgy now draws us into another aspect of the Mystery, that of the presence and absence of the One who has been raised. The physical loss of Jesus means a new and different sort of presence. Like the early Christians, we need time to grasp each dimension of the one great Mystery of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

Today's gospel passage receives little attention in commentaries and classes because, along with the immediately preceding passage (Mark 16:9-14), it is a late addition to the original text of Mark's gospel. The author of these verses is familiar with the similar commission to proclaim the good news to all nations and to baptise in the name of the Trinity, found at the end of Matthew's gospel. In Mark 16:15, the command is to go "into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation (*ktisis*)." It is a more inclusive vision than Matthew's and opens a space for an ecological reading of the text, an extension from the human to the other-than and more-than-human elements of the Earth community. The command to proclaim the good news, the gospel, recalls the first words of the Markan Jesus, "The time is fulfilled, and the kin-dom of God has come near; repent [=expand your horizons], and believe in the good news" (1:15).

If we were to accept that our mission in the "in-between times" is to bring the gospel to all creation, then we might take more seriously God's command in Genesis 2 to reverence and protect the earth (usually translated as "to till and to keep"). We might stop polluting the air that all creatures need for life. We might also read the affirmations of Genesis 1 through the lens of Mark 16 and respect once more the intrinsic goodness of all creation as a gospel imperative.

The "Ascension" event recounted towards the end of the passage presupposes a pre-scientific, three-tiered understanding of the structure of the cosmos. In this ancient view, God is in the heavens above and Jesus is caught up into God's realm. The vertical movement is balanced by a horizontal movement: Jesus' return to "the right hand of God" ensures a different kind of presence in the church despite his seeming absence, one that enables the believer to continue the healing and re-creative ministry of Jesus "to all creation".

Reflection on the Gospel-Pentecost Sunday Year B
(John 20:19-23)

-Veronica Lawson RSM

Pentecost Sunday is often called the birthday of the Church. For the ancient Israelites, Pentecost (meaning 'fiftieth') was a harvest festival celebrated 50 days after the beginning of the harvest. When the Jerusalem Temple was built, this harvest festival was transformed into a pilgrimage feast to celebrate the covenant that God had made with Israel on Mt Sinai. Several decades after the death of Jesus, the early Christians reflected on their origins and chose this feast to mark the birth of God's new covenant with God's people.

In today's first reading, Luke tells the new Pentecost story in symbolic language that evokes the story of Moses and the people of Israel receiving God's Law on Mt Sinai. Just as God's presence to Israel was marked by earthquake and thunder and fire, so God's Spirit enveloping the people of the new covenant appears in a mighty rush of wind and tongues of fire. Luke's account also evokes early rabbinic teaching that the voice of God on Sinai divided into seventy tongues and all the nations received the Law in their own tongue.

For the teaching at the heart of the new covenant, we turn to the gospel reading from John. The risen Christ appears to the disciples who are huddled behind locked doors. He offers the simple greeting: "Peace be with you," the greeting we offer each other at every Eucharistic celebration. He sends them on a mission of peace in continuity with his own God-inspired mission. He breathes on them the gift of the Holy Spirit and tells them that God will forgive those whom they forgive, and will "retain" or "seize hold of" the transgressions of those whose sins or transgressions they "retain".

To seize hold of wrong-doing is to expose it and deal with it. Sometimes it is best to forgive and simply allow everyone to move on. In other situations, an easy amnesty only exacerbates the problem. Much of the enduring conflict in our world derives from the inability of ordinary people and of leaders to know how to deal with transgression. The Holy Spirit is the unique source of our power to forgive, of our capacity to deal with the perpetrators of violence, and of the strength we need to refrain from vengeance. Sadly, the desire for vengeance often inhibits healing in those who have suffered violence or abuse, and even in those who endeavour to support them, so that the cycle of transgression continues. We must work ceaselessly as a global community to address the causes of violence and abuse and search together for lasting solutions. As we celebrate Pentecost Sunday, let us gather into our hearts all the distressed members of our Earth community and pray with greater urgency than ever: "Come Holy Spirit, renew the face of the Earth."

Reflection on the Gospel-Trinity Sunday Year B
(Matt 28:16-20)

-Veronica Lawson RSM

Trinity Sunday celebrates the core Christian conviction that God is a communion of relational love. For the people of Israel, no other god could compare with their God whom they knew as both creator and liberator and whom they experienced as intimately involved in every aspect of their history and of their day-to-day lives. In a world of many gods, the assertion found in today's first reading from Deuteronomy that there is "no other god" was an enormous claim to make. God's sustaining and liberating presence brought with it serious responsibilities: keeping God's commandments grounded the people of Israel and their descendants in the life of their God.

The earliest Christians inherited the Jewish belief in one God. At the same time, Christians expressed their faith in distinctively Trinitarian language. Over the first six centuries of the Christian era, the belief that God is a communion of love was to develop into the doctrine of the Trinity, a teaching that is at the heart of Christian faith. The word Trinity is not used in the Christian Scriptures. In fact, it was not until the Council of Constantinople in 381CE that the doctrine of the Trinity was set out in the creed, and not until the Second Council of Constantinople in 551CE that the word "Trinity" was actually used of the Triune God.

Today's gospel reading brings Matthew's gospel to a close. Jesus commands his disciples to make disciples of all peoples and to baptize in the name of the Trinity. At the beginning of this gospel, Jesus is named Emmanuel, "God with us". With Jesus' final assurance, "know that I am with you always", we find ourselves gathered into the very life of God. *Perichoresis*, a Greek term suggestive of a cyclical movement or of figures interweaving, is one of the earliest and probably one of the most striking images used to explain the Trinity. The life that is in God is understood, in this image, as a totally harmonious movement of equals. The wonder is that we are gathered into this movement. As St. Paul reminds us, God is not a distant God, but rather a God whose Spirit draws us, as "joint heirs with Christ", into God's own life of love and relationship. Trinity Sunday is the day we set aside to celebrate the nearness of God who invites us into the dynamic cycle of life and love, a cycle that reaches out beyond the human community and embraces the entire cosmos. As we make the sign of the cross, we might become more and more attentive to the wonder of the divine life that dwells in us and in whom we are privileged to dwell.

**Reflection on the Gospel-The Body and Blood of Christ Year B
(Mark 14:12-16, 22-26)**

-Veronica Lawson RSM

The Gospel for today reminds us that we are in a “covenant” relationship with our God. We renew that covenant in every celebration of the Eucharist. The Israelites of old sealed their covenant with God in animal sacrifice, a practice we may wish to critique, and in the celebration of a meal (Exodus 24:1-12). The blood of the slain animal was sprinkled on the altar and on the people. The people knew that blood signified life: if blood spilled out then life spilled out. The altar signified God. The sprinkling of the blood denoted their shared life with God. They were called to be holy as God is holy. The symbolism of the Jewish covenant ritual informs today’s Gospel story of Jesus’ final Passover meal with his disciples. Through the actions and words of Jesus, the bread broken and shared becomes his body broken and “given” for them. The sharing of the cup of wine becomes their sharing in the life of Jesus “to be poured out for many”. Bread and wine in this context have taken on a new meaning.

While all analogies fall short, we might begin to understand this mystery by considering the Eureka flag. The flag is constructed of fabric and thread. It is housed in the Museum of Australian Democracy at Eureka and protected with the utmost care. Because of its associations with the Eureka rebellion and what Eureka stands for in Australian history and folklore, it carries the story that informs its creation as well as all the goodness of its fabric and thread. It has acquired multiple levels of meaning.

Through the actions and words of Jesus, the bread and wine of the Eucharist likewise signify something entirely new along with all the goodness of their materiality. They are Life for us, the shared life of the Risen Christ. We are called to bring that life to others, to give life for the sake of the many. Reading the passage in the context of Mark's gospel provides some insight into how we might do this. The eleven preceding verses recount stories of contrasting responses to Jesus as he faces his final days: temple authorities plot to destroy him; an unnamed woman “breaks” an alabaster jar and “pours” the healing perfume on his head, thus anointing his body “for burial” through eucharistic action; Jesus declares that what she has done will be told “in remembrance of her”; a close friend seeks to betray him.

Betrayal and rejection are ever present possibilities even in Eucharistic communities. We are all too aware of this as we endeavour to address the consequences of child sexual abuse in our communities. We need to learn from the other possibility presented to us in this context, namely that of pouring out the healing perfume of compassion and love on our fractured Earth communities.

**Reflection on the Gospel-10th Sunday in Ordinary Time Year B
(Mark 3:20-35)**

-Veronica Lawson RSM

Name calling is an age old device used to discredit enemies. Politicians are adept at finding labels with which to discredit their opponents. Sometimes the labels stick and often have the effect of destroying good people. In today's gospel, Jesus is subjected to the worst of all imaginable taunts or labels: he is said to be possessed by Beelzebub, the prince of demons. The story belongs within a trajectory of growing hostility towards him from the authorities.

Mark has presented Jesus as the Christ or Messiah, as God's Son who is authorised to usher in God's empire of reconciliation and peace. Jesus is the "stronger one" (1:7) who will destroy the powers of evil. He invites others to join him in his mission of healing, of proclaiming God's reign and of driving out demons. Those on the edge of Palestinian society flock to him for healing. The religious authorities, on the other hand, find themselves challenged, even threatened, by Jesus' growing popularity and his perceived challenge to their strict interpretation of aspects of the Mosaic Law. Such practices as dining with those considered to be "sinners" and permitting his hungry disciples to pluck grain on the Sabbath, for instance, are met with hostile responses from the religious authorities.

For Jesus, always the faithful Jew, the Law was established for humans, not humans for the Law and he is not afraid to say so. Early in his ministry, opposition has built to a point that traditional enemies, the Pharisees and the Herodians, join forces to find a way of destroying him. The surprise is that members of Jesus' biological family now get involved in the attempts to put a halt to his mission, even if their motives differ from those of the Jerusalem "scribes" who bring the charge of demon-possession. One factor to consider is that the family's honour is at stake. Another factor is the family's concern that Jesus and his disciples were failing to take care of themselves. The demands were such that "they could not even eat". Even if well-motivated, they want "to seize him" because they consider him to be "out of his mind". Jesus' biological family thus falls into the trap of taking responsibility for him instead of supporting him to pursue his dream.

Mark often places a story within a story. In this instance, the story within is the challenge from the scribes and of Jesus' powerful counter-challenge. The outer frame consists of the efforts of Jesus' biological family to save their honour by saving him from a crazy lifestyle and by his redefining of his "family" as those "who do the will of God". This complex story invites us to refrain from labelling those who threaten our status or authority. They may just happen to be agents of God's transforming grace for us and for our world

**Reflection on the Gospel-11th Sunday in Ordinary Time Year B
(Mark 4:26-34)**

-Veronica Lawson RSM

The first of the parables in today's gospel reading has no parallel in the other gospels. It compares God's kin-dom to a trusting sower who scatters the seed by day, sleeps by night, and simply observes the "earth produce of itself" until it is time to harvest the grain. The sower's actions of scattering, sleeping, rising, and going in with his sickle are paralleled by his "not-knowing how" the seed is transformed into grain. We may, in our times, have a more sophisticated, more scientific understanding of the process of growth. We have no less reason to stand in awe at the wonder of it all.

In an era of urbanization, supermarket chains, and online shopping even for groceries, we can easily lose sight of the source of food and the miracle of food production. This little parable might serve as a reminder of the goodness of the Earth and of the God who sustains our planetary home. It might inspire us to contemplate the myriad ways in which the Earth speaks to us of God and God's empire or kin-dom.

At another level, we might ask about the identity of the sower. We might question how the sower's actions and attitudes provide an image of God's reign. Is it in the sower's trusting that all will be well while "not-knowing"? Is it in the observation that the grain is ripe for the harvest? Is it in the prompt action to bring in the harvest? Parables are meant to tease their hearers/readers. They are open-ended and challenging.

The second parable appears in all three synoptic gospels. Matthew and Luke both parallel the mustard seed parable with a parable about a woman mixing yeast into flour. Mark, in contrast, juxtaposes his mustard seed parable with that of the trusting sower. Mustard seeds were tiny, although they were not the smallest of seeds and have never been known to become the largest of shrubs. The idea that God's reign provides shelter for the birds to make their nests is a challenging one at a time when so many species are becoming extinct precisely because their habitats are being destroyed by human activity.

Some scholars have pointed out that the mustard seed was a weed. To compare God's reign with a weed may have brought a smile or two. It would certainly have exercised the minds of Jesus' audience. Maybe Jesus' disciples were in need of encouragement even in the early stages of the Galilean ministry. Maybe the curious and hostile were in need of a reminder to take this movement seriously, for extraordinary things can come from the most inauspicious beginnings. Opposition to Jesus had surfaced at the outset. Mark's community may also have been experiencing opposition and feeling the need for the wisdom that comes from a carefully crafted and perfectly timed story.

**Reflection on the Gospel-Birthday of John the Baptizer
(Luke 1:57-66, 80)**

-Veronica Lawson RSM

Today's gospel is a good news story. Most of us respond with joy to the birth of a child, especially when the odds are stacked against the parents conceiving. As the child grows to maturity, friends and family might look back and interpret later achievements in the light of childhood expectation and promise. Stories of birth and childhood are often told in the light of later events. The story of the birth of John the Baptizer is told with hindsight and against the background of Jewish expectations in the Second Temple period. The gospel writers reflect on the role John played in recognising the significance of Jesus of Nazareth and in pointing to Jesus as the unique agent and prophet of God's empire over against the Roman Empire.

Luke is the only gospel writer to reflect on John's "pre-history" and to hint that his birth belonged within the biblical tradition of the "wondrous" births of remarkable people. He interprets the birth of John as an expression of God's "great mercy". Luke narrates the childhood story of John in parallel and yet in appropriate relationship with the story of the child Jesus, whose identity and mission represent the ultimate revelation of Israel's God.

In announcing the birth of John the Baptizer, storyteller Luke uses the language of fulfilment: "the time came" [for Elizabeth to give birth] is literally "the time was fulfilled". The birth of this child is a time of the fulfilment of God's word, as previously announced by the angel Gabriel to his father Zechariah (Luke 1:13-17). Zechariah had been told not to fear, for his wife Elizabeth would give birth to a son and "you will name him John".

Joy and gladness would be the response to the birth of this child who was to be "filled with Holy Spirit even before his birth". John's destiny was "to make ready a people". Jesus, the one for whom John is "preparing the way" will later refer to him as "a prophet" and "more than a prophet" (Luke 7:27). Zechariah, who refuses to believe that he and Elizabeth will have a child in their advanced years, is told that he will be mute "until the day these things occur" (1:17. "These things" encompass the birth of the child, the joy-filled response of the faith community and the naming of the child eight days after birth. John's name, meaning "YHWH (the God of Israel) has shown grace", foreshadows the extraordinary mark that this child, the son of Elizabeth and Zechariah, will make on his world and consequently on ours. Like John, we are called to "make ready a people", to prepare the way. For Australian Catholics, commitment to creative participation in the forthcoming Plenary Council preparations might be a fitting way to celebrate this feast.

**Reflection on the Gospel-13th Sunday in Ordinary Time Year B
(Mark 5:21-43)**

-Veronica Lawson RSM

As noted in relation to Mark 3:21-35, Mark's gospel often has a story within a story. Some scholars refer to this technique as the making of a Markan sandwich, others as a framing device. In Mark 5:21-43, the frame consists of the two-part story of the desperately ill twelve year old daughter of Jairus, a synagogue official. Jairus falls at the feet of Jesus in an attitude of reverence and pleads with him to come and lay hands on her. Jesus is clearly known as a healer, one who can "save" life. The passage closes with the young woman's seeming death and restoration to life. In between, we have the story of an older woman, also seriously ill, possibly with a gynaecological problem: she has been haemorrhaging for twelve years.

The stories are linked in many ways, first by the repetition of the number twelve-a symbolic number in a Jewish context. Both the young Jewish woman and the older Jewish woman are in need of the saving power of God mediated through Jesus the healer. Later in the Markan story (7:24-30), a Gentile mother will also beg for healing for her daughter who will receive that same saving power of God. Jairus' daughter does not speak for herself. Like all young women of that culture, ill or not, she is dependent on the voice of her father. The older woman comes tentatively "from behind". She speaks, but only to herself, as she touches Jesus' cloak and experiences healing in her body. The healing power of God suffuses even the fabric of a protective outer garment. The woman is finally shamed into telling all. Like Jairus, she falls at the feet of Jesus. Jairus refers to his child on the brink of adulthood as "my daughter". Jesus addresses the older woman as "my daughter".

Both women, the younger and the older, are daughters of Israel. Both are restored to health, one on account of her parents' faith (the faith of an unnamed mother and a named father), the other because of her own faith. Jesus the healer has embraced and responded to the pain of a woman alone on the one hand and of a family (mother, father, and daughter) on the other.

Towards the end of the gospel (14:3-9), this Jesus who has brought healing to little children, to older women and younger women, to older men and younger men, to Jews and to Gentiles, will himself become the recipient of the healing ministry of an insightful woman who draws on Earth elements and pours out healing ointment. Jesus will recognise this action as a beautiful thing that she has done "in him" For now, the stories recount "the beautiful thing" that Jesus does in the lives of suffering humanity, irrespective of age or gender or status or ethnicity.

**Reflection on the Gospel – 14th Sunday in Ordinary Time Year B
(Mark 6:1-6)**

-Veronica Lawson RSM

Most of us have known the experience of feeling powerless in the face of rejection, especially when it is rejection from those who are closest to us, from those who might normally be expected to understand and affirm us. Mark presents such rejection as the experience of Jesus. Earlier in the gospel (3:20-21), we find that Jesus is misunderstood by his family who consider him to be out of his mind. Members of his family try to take responsibility for him, to take hold of him and to save him from himself. When they come to take him away, he leaves them outside and continues to teach those gathered around him about a new sort of kinship, kinship that is based on doing God's will.

In today's gospel reading (6:1-6), we find that the neighbours and friends of Jesus' family have trouble coping with him. They admit that his teaching demonstrates considerable wisdom. They also acknowledge his extraordinary power as a healer. From their perspective, however, something does not add up. After all, he is basically just one of them, "the craftsman".

Jesus' hometown people do not simply puzzle over his extraordinary powers. They are actually "scandalised" by him. He experiences their response as rejection and tells them how he feels. In so doing, he identifies himself with the rejected prophets of old. The townspeople's lack of faith renders Jesus, the prophet in their midst, powerless: he is simply unable to perform any mighty deeds among them. There is a hint in the text, however, that some few do have faith: "he cured a few sick people." He cures these people "by laying his hands on them". We have seen, in the request of the man with leprosy (1:41) and the action of the crowds (3:10,) the people's well-founded faith in the healing power of touch, of bodily encounter. Touch is once more the agent of healing.

At times, we may be like Jesus, bringing the wisdom and power of God to our families or local communities, only to meet with rejection. Sometimes, we may be like the few who come in faith and experience a healing touch. At other times, we may replicate the behaviour of the opponents of Jesus and discount the achievements of those who excel or whose message challenges us or our lifestyle. To refuse to listen to a prophetic message because the messenger fails to meet our preconceived ideas about prophets may have something to do with a lack of faith. It may actually stymie the power of God. Finally, the emphasis on healing in this reading invites us to pause and consider the intrinsic value of all, human and other-than-human, so often denigrated and devalued by attitudes that dichotomise the material and the spiritual with dire consequences for the Earth community.

**Reflection on the Gospel-15th Sunday in Ordinary Time Year B
(Mark 6:7-13)**

-Veronica Lawson, RSM

To be a disciple of Jesus is to experience a call. It is also to be sent on a mission in partnership with others, a mission invariably expressed in terms of preaching, teaching, healing, and/or driving out of demons or unclean spirits. In other words, it is to be authorised to do what Jesus did and to proclaim what he proclaimed. When we hear of Jesus casting out demons and telling his disciples to do likewise, we tend to think that whatever they did is something that belongs to another time and has little to do with our contemporary society.

In the cosmology of the time, there was a realm between the divine and the human that was inhabited by good and evil spirits (angels and demons). The divide between these realms was conceptualised as porous so that humans could be protected by the angels or “possessed” by the demons. While the cosmology of the twenty-first century has no “place” for such beings, the contemporary imagination allows space for a metaphorical engagement with the angelic and demonic. When we speak of “demons” now, we are talking about something recognisable in human experience, even if somewhat removed from the “demons” that beset the poor in the Roman imperial provinces of the first century.

Today’s parents spend much of their time casting out the “demons” that beset their children, as do our friends when they sit and listen to the pain in our hearts and help us to let go of the “demons” that so often inhabit our psyches. Many health professionals are paid to heal the hurts as well as the cuts and burns. They drive out the demons of fear and hate and prejudice and of paralysing mental illness. Educators also, aware that learning occurs only when students are relatively free from fear and anxiety, know what it means to drive out the demons.

It is significant that Jesus instructs the disciples to travel light. They need the basics to live and to do their job, but if their mission is to be effective, they must be free from the anxiety that comes from excess. Psychologist and social critic John F. Schumacher suggests that societies with the most material goods tend to be the most anxious. “Mutual respect, community-mindedness, an eagerness to share, reverence for nature, thankfulness and love of life”, it seems, are the major ingredients for a stress- or “demon”-free personal and community life. There would be no need to shake the dust from our feet for want of hospitality if that were the way we all chose to live. What’s more, there would be enough for all on our planet, the human and other-and-human, to live in dignity and peace.

Reflection on the Gospel-16th Sunday in Ordinary Time Year B
(Mark 6:30-34)

-Veronica M. Lawson RSM

In every life, there is need for a balanced rhythm of work and recreation. With so much pain and suffering in our world, the demands of living a gospel way of life can overwhelm us and cause us to act as though everything depends on us. While we can never really escape the responsibility of being there for those in need, today's gospel reminds us that there is a time for being out on mission and a time for being with the one who calls and sends us.

The apostles have been busy—preaching, healing and driving out the “demons” as instructed. They now report back to Jesus with an account of their activities and are invited to take time to rest and recuperate. “Come away to a desert place all by yourselves and rest a while” is the invitation that Jesus extends to them. The reference to desert evokes the wilderness of Sinai through which the people of Israel travelled for forty years. For the contemporary reader, it evokes the diversity of life in the desert, on the one hand, and the desertification of so much of the earth's surface as a result of tree-clearing and mindless destruction of forests on the other.

The “rest” that Jesus proposes is short-lived: the crowds pursue him. His response to these crowds is a physical one: he is “moved with compassion”. The Greek verb for being moved with compassion suggests a “gut” reaction in Jesus: he is physically affected in the depths of his being by the plight of the people who are “like sheep without a shepherd”, and he is ready to do something about it. As the story continues, we find Jesus inviting his disciples to accept responsibility for relieving the hunger of the people in the desert. “*You* give them something to eat” is his instruction to those who would turn the people away.

Like the Israelites of old, the afflicted Earth community in any age needs good leaders or “shepherds” who will “practice justice and righteousness in the land”, as the first reading from the prophet Jeremiah reminds us. The Hebrew word for justice refers to justice in the law courts. The word for righteousness is about right relationship at every level. Jesus demonstrates for his disciples and for us what justice and righteousness entail.

As the gospel story unfolds, we find that Jesus' disciples are well-meaning, though slow to learn. They are a bit like us in that. The more we take time to reflect, however, the more likely we are to respond with the compassionate heart of the “shepherd”, and the more likely we are to achieve lasting justice and right relationship in a world of unconscionable disparities and unprecedented displacement of peoples and of other-than-human species.

**Reflection on the Gospel-17th Sunday in Ordinary Time Year B
(John 6:1-15)**

-Veronica M. Lawson RSM

The gospel readings for the next five weeks are taken from John 6, a section of the gospel that focuses on food and related themes: on hungry people; on the need for food/bread; on food/bread as metaphors for life. Bread has been the staple food for millennia in bible lands. To be without bread is to lack the very basics of existence, and that is how it is for so many in our world. Even the impoverished in the so-called “first world” know what it is like to be without the means of subsistence in a world of plenty. The present cycle of readings confronts us with questions about our own lifestyle, our exploitation of earth’s precious resources, and our capacity to make a positive change in the lives of those whose access to the fruits of our earth is much more limited than ours.

In John’s account of the feeding of the 5000, the crowds keep following Jesus because they see the “signs” he works among the sick. The Johannine Jesus consistently tries to lead the people beyond a form of discipleship that is simply based on seeing the signs that he works. The inadequacy of the crowd’s response on this occasion becomes clear towards the end of the reading.

Both place and time function powerfully in the story. The “mountain” place evokes the giving of the Law to Moses on Mt Sinai. For the crowds, Jesus is the prophet like Moses who points to a way of satisfying hunger in the wilderness of life. The time is Passover, drawing into the narrative the passing over of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt to the freedom of the desert and ultimately of the land where they could worship their God. This story is about the liberation that God brings through the agency of Jesus.

Jesus demonstrates that the answer to the suffering of the people, their liberation, is to be found in their care for each other. If they simply take the time to sit down together, discover the riches in their midst, give thanks, and distribute what they have, they may find they have more than they need. They must gather up the fragments, the “more-than-enough”, so that nothing will be lost and others might benefit from their sharing.

Although the people partially understand Jesus’ identity and teaching, their ultimate response is misdirected, even violent: they want to take him by force and make him king. He leaves them and returns to the mountain alone. We so often seek spectacular solutions to our problems. It may be that we too need to sit down together, on the grass or wherever, and discover the wealth we have at our disposal to satisfy the hunger in our world. That is what it means to be a Eucharistic people.

**Reflection on the Gospel-18th Sunday in Ordinary Time Year B
(John 6:24-35)**

-Veronica M. Lawson RSM

We have become so familiar with the sayings of Jesus that we can easily fail to notice the earth elements in the text or the constructed environment and treat them simply as backdrop for human activity rather than as having value in themselves. Jesus' claim "I am the bread of life" invites us to consider bread as matter essential to life as well as a metaphor for God's incarnate Word. It invites us to consider what both material and symbolic dimensions of the statement might mean for living a gospel way of life.

We might note the close attention in this passage to the material and social context of Jesus' words. Boats, a town (Capernaum), the sea (of Galilee), the land on the "other side" all feature in this text. For those who have visited Galilee and seen the first century boat preserved in Kibbutz Ginnosar, reference to boats might evoke the diversity of wooden materials used in boat construction, in this case mostly oak and cedar. It might also alert us to the human communities that interacted with the material world to build the boats so integral to the life of the lake communities.

Those who have seen images of Capernaum will be aware of the basalt building materials used in the construction of the houses and might be led to wonder at the extraordinary processes of rock formation. The Sea of Galilee has agency in so many gospel stories. Here it is mentioned in passing, but must not be ignored, especially as we become aware of how perilously endangered it has become since its waters have been exploited for irrigation over several decades. The "other side" evokes the rich agricultural land generally referred to as the "bread-basket" of the region. Mention of the crowd introduces children as well as women and men searching for Jesus. In other words, the text invites us into the whole Galilean world encoded in the text.

The question, "Rabbi, *when* did you come *here*?", has to do with time and place. Jesus is addressed as teacher, as one who can lead his questioners from one physical and metaphorical place to another. It is his response to this question that introduces the discussion about bread. This in turn opens up a whole world of earth activity, of sun and soil and seed and plant, a world of planting and harvesting, of processing and cooking. Ironically, the words of the Johannine Jesus with their focus on the symbolic meaning of the bread turn his questioners away from the physical, material Earth elements that constitute both bread and flesh. Pope Francis invites us again and again to value and respect the material world. The more we do so, the more attuned we will be to the implications of accepting that Jesus is the bread of life.

**Reflection on the Gospel-19th Sunday in Ordinary Time Year B
(John 6:41-51)**

-Veronica M. Lawson RSM

It is sometimes forgotten that Jesus was a Jew, as was John, the author of the gospel. It may seem strange, therefore, that John has the “Jews” complaining about Jesus. It is indeed strange, and it has caused many a reader to wonder. John seems to use the designation “Jew” as a code word for the opponents of Jesus. These opponents are almost exclusively Jewish leaders rather than the ordinary people who followed Jesus. The designation does not include all the Jewish leaders of course: Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea stand out as leaders who came to believe in Jesus as the Christ and to take risks on account of their faith.

The complaint of the “Jews” relates to Jesus’ claim, “I am the bread that came down from heaven”. Jesus shares the world view or cosmology of his contemporaries: God is in the heavens above, so that anything or anyone coming from God in that view comes *down from heaven*. The problem for his adversaries is that Jesus is one of them: they know his father Joseph and his forebears, so how can he be making such a claim? They make the mistake of thinking that this is all there is to know about his origins. “Don’t complain” is Jesus’ response to them. He proceeds to tell them that there are dimensions of his being of which they know nothing. Yet they need to know, as do we. It is God who draws us to Jesus. Like the opponents of Jesus, we need to listen and to learn, to be taught by God. We need bread in order to live and we also need the bread of God’s teaching.

Jesus makes a future promise: the bread he offers is different from the bread the Israelites ate in the desert, in that those who eat of it will live forever. Furthermore, the bread that he will give for the life of the world is his flesh. This leads to further misunderstanding and the opportunity for Jesus to teach at another level. The eucharistic overtones in today’s reading are subtle but nonetheless present, as they were in the feeding story.

John is writing some seventy years after the death of Jesus for communities that gathered every week for the breaking of the bread-in remembrance of him and of all that he enacted. Like the early Christians, we reflect on the meaning of eucharist. We recognise and honour the materiality of the bread and of the flesh that Jesus shares with all living creatures. At the same time we are invited to reflect on the symbolic or metaphorical resonances of both bread and flesh in the context of the claims of the Johannine Jesus. The question for us then becomes: “How do we live into this extraordinary mystery as we face the demands of our endangered planet?”

**Reflection on the Gospels-20th Sunday in Ordinary Time Year B
(John 6:51-58)**

-Veronica M. Lawson RSM

In this week's gospel passage, we continue our reflection on John 6. John's gospel was written towards the end of the first century. The Bread of Life discourse probably reflects the interpretation of the gospel writer rather than the actual words of Jesus. This is important for making sense of statements in the discourse that would seem to be out of place from the lips of Jesus during his lifetime. The hearers of these words have lived and worshipped as followers of Jesus for some decades. They have gathered each week for the breaking of the bread and reflected deeply on the mystery of the Word made flesh, the mystery of life in Christ.

If there were eucharistic overtones subtly present in last week's gospel passage (John 6:41-51), they become quite overt as the Johannine Jesus responds to yet another objection from his opponents in this week's gospel. Like the Israelites of old in the desert wanderings, these people are more than ready to grumble: "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?" (6:52). Jesus does not really respond to the question "How....?" Rather, he goes on to tell those who want to hear that "life" for them depends on their eating his flesh and drinking his blood. The Johannine Jesus uses the present as well as the future tense. The life they experience in eating his flesh and drinking his blood is a present reality for them as well as a promise of on-going life. Life for the Israelites was in the blood: blood poured out meant life poured out. Clearly "life" is being used in John 6 for the quality of life the believers have come to experience through their incorporation into the community of the baptised, the sort of life that is not destroyed by death.

Life in the community unites the believers intimately with Jesus as well as with the God of Israel, whom the Johannine Jesus generally calls "Father". The first reading for today reminds us that other metaphors such as Wisdom were available to those of Jewish heritage for imaging the divine. Wisdom is a female way of imaging the divine. In John's discourse, Jesus becomes Wisdom extending an invitation to the banquet of life. We keep accepting that invitation. It is well to remember that one never enjoys a banquet alone. It is always shared with others who accept the same invitation. In the strength of the sustenance we receive in this banquet, we are also invited to bring a quality of life to all beings that struggle to exist, the human and the other-than-human. The potential for this is as boundless as the generosity of our God "enfleshed" in Jesus.

**Reflection on the Gospel-21st Sunday in Ordinary Time Year B
(John 6:60-69)**

-Veronica M. Lawson RSM

If we have trouble understanding and coming to terms with the teachings of Jesus in the gospel, then we can take some comfort from the reaction of the disciples in John's community some decades after the death of Jesus. It seems that it was not only the members of the Jewish synagogue who were offended by his teaching, but also those Jews who had accepted Jesus as Messiah or Christ and had joined the community of believers. "This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?" they complain. They are referring to his teaching on the "bread" that he will give them. Once again, Jesus' response introduces new teaching, teaching that can only raise more questions in their minds. He links "spirit" with "life". Having used the term "flesh" of his body and of the life that he offers to those who eat of his flesh, he now introduces an element of doubt: flesh is now "useless"! We must be careful not to interpret this literally. It is typical of John to use the same word in a variety of ways. Here "flesh" is used negatively and metaphorically to refer to human weakness and sinfulness in contrast with "spirit" which evokes the creative spirit of God that moved over the waters at creation and the spirit of God that informed the word of the prophets.

The Johannine Jesus lays the ground for offering progressively deeper insights into his identity and destiny and into the meaning of the Christian life. The reference to his "ascending" recalls the earlier part to the gospel where he is presented as the pre-existent one, the one who comes from God and has already ascended to God (John 3:13). Once again, we are confronted with an ancient cosmology that places God in the heavens above. After his death, Jesus will tell Mary Magdalene that he has not yet ascended and instructs her to tell the disciples that he is ascending to God (20:17). It seems that John wants to keep emphasising the origins of Jesus as the eternal Word and the Wisdom of God.

There are many who refuse to grapple with the complexities and implications of his teaching and they turn away. Jesus asks his closest followers if they too will desert. Peter speaks for himself and his companions when he declares their undying allegiance: "*To whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life.*" Eternal life is the Johannine equivalent of the "kingdom of God" or "of the heavens" of the other gospels. Most of us have wanted to abandon our commitment at some time or another. Peter's declaration is a sobering one for us in times of doubt and an encouragement for those of us who seek to understand more deeply and to keep believing despite the challenges.

**Reflection on the Gospel-22nd Sunday in Ordinary Time Year B
(Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23)**

-Veronica Lawson RSM

After a lengthy detour over the past six weeks into the gospel of John with its focus on Jesus as the Bread of Life and the Bread of Wisdom, we return to Mark's gospel and a legal dispute about ritual purity. The parties to the dispute are Jesus, the Pharisees, and some of the scribes or teachers of the law. [It is worth noting that Mark's non-Jewish readers, at a later time and in another place, need to be given detailed information about certain Jewish traditions].

At issue for the scribes and Pharisees in the story is the failure of Jesus' disciples to respect their oral tradition, in this instance to perform ritual washings before eating. From their perspective, the disciples are not "walking" according to the tradition of the elders. For the Markan Jesus, "the command of God" is paramount, not some distorted interpretation of it. He offers a hard-hitting counter-critique of their attitude to law. He calls them "hypocrites" and informs them that the condemnation of the prophet Isaiah was intended for them. They have so distorted God's law, substituting their own observances for the "commandment of God" that their prayer amounts to nothing more than lip-service, their hearts are far from God, and their worship is worthless! For Jesus, there are criteria other than such observances for determining who is clean or unclean. He has already declared the leper clean (Mk 1:41-45). For Jesus, the "heart" is the locus of purity and impurity. For him as for all his people, the heart was the seat of the intellect and of morality as well as of the emotions. In the kin-dom of God, therefore, one's thoughts, desires, and intentions render one clean or unclean, not one's attention to hygiene. The latter is important of course, but is peripheral in the grand scheme of things. It is worth applying the criteria provided at the end of the passage to discover whether or not our "hearts" are near or distant from our God.

The real-life Pharisees of the first century were the respected teachers of God's law. It is imperative that stories such as we find in today's gospel are not used to denigrate the Jews or to pit Christianity over against Judaism. We have to keep reminding ourselves that time and again we are dealing with in-house debates between Jewish groups.

Finally, this episode, with its attention to ritual washing, raises the issue of the right use of water, that precious earth element without which there would be no life at all on our planet. Plastic free July this year alerted many of us to the problem that the plastic bottling of water has brought to the future of life on our planet. It may be time to buy a "Keep Cup" and reaffirm our commitment to protecting God's creation.

**Reflection on the Gospel-23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time Year B
(Mark 7:31-37)**

-Veronica Lawson RSM

Those who are profoundly deaf frequently find themselves on the edge of the human and Earth communities. Without access to birdsong, to spoken discourse, to music and to the vast range of media communication, they often struggle to understand and to be understood. Their capacity to communicate their deepest wisdom, their hopes and dreams, their anxieties and fears, is limited not only by personal disability but also by the incomprehension or even the impatience of others.

In our contemporary technological world, sophisticated hearing devices and cochlear implants transform the lives of many who previously suffered from serious hearing loss and its social consequences. Whatever degree of deafness is experienced, relief from such an affliction offers far more than physical healing. It brings insertion into the life of family and community and workplace. It opens up new horizons and unimagined possibilities.

In first century Palestine, the chances of relief from hearing deficiency and associated speech impairment were minimal. Desperate people put their faith in folk healers who used their healing hands and drew upon their knowledge of the medicinal properties in certain herbs and other plants. It seems clear that Jesus was known as an effective healer and that he used some of the same methods as other healers of his time. Many of his contemporaries in that part of the world would have turned to Asclepius, the Greek god of healing, or his daughter Hygeia. Jesus turns, not to Asclepius or Hygeia, but to the God of Israel (“looking up to heaven...”) as the source of healing power.

There is layer upon layer of meaning in today’s healing story. Habitat features significantly. Jesus travels from Tyre on the northern Mediterranean coast to the Sea of Galilee via the non-Jewish territory on the eastern side of the lake. It was a regular route, but definitely not the most direct one. The gospel writer seems to be stressing the all-embracing nature of Jesus’ healing ministry. Land belongs to God and territorial claims on land are no barrier to Jesus’ healing ministry, a lesson Jesus himself has just learned from the Syro-Phoenician woman whose story is told in Mark 7:26-30.

As the gospel story has unfolded, we have found that the same healing power of God is available to Jews and Gentiles, to male and female, young and old alike. It is available to those with bodily afflictions and to those who are paralysed by anxiety and fear. There is irony in the telling of the story: a Gentile deaf man can be brought from no hearing to hearing, from “speaking with difficulty” to clarity of speech, but Jesus’ own disciples will shortly fail to hear and understand, “Do you have ears and not hear?” (Mark 8:18). Let us bury our prejudices and open our ears to hear in the hope that we might come to understand..

**Reflection on the Gospel-24th Sunday in Ordinary Time Year B
(Mark 8:27-35)**

-Veronica M. Lawson RSM

Today's gospel reading leads us into a section of Mark's gospel that explores challenges confronting all disciples on their journey of faith. The first challenge is to clarify the nature of our commitment as disciples of Jesus. If we fail to understand who Jesus is, then we have little chance of understanding the nature of our own call to follow him. Two questions ("Who do *people* say that I am?" and "Who do *you* say that I am?") are addressed to our forbears in faith communities of the latter part of the first century and to Christians across the millennia. We are invited to hear these questions anew. Do we simply share what "the people" say about Jesus? Are we like Peter who has the right language but only partial insight? Or do we have the wisdom to seek a deeper understanding of the identity of Jesus?

In response to Jesus' second question ("Who do you say that I am?"), Peter gets the words right: Jesus is the Messiah, the Christ, God's anointed messenger. It becomes clear, however, that Peter has a very different notion from Jesus of what it means to be the Messiah or the Christ. This is understandable since there were diverse messianic expectations within first-century Judaism. Many expected a royal militaristic figure who would drive out the Roman occupiers and restore Israel's status as an independent nation. Jesus, as God's Messiah, refuses the way of violent action. His way is to be true to his mission of bringing God's empire, even if it brings the most intense personal suffering. Peter refuses to accept a suffering Messiah. He is severely reprimanded for his refusal and instructed to get out of the way, to get back to where a disciple should be, namely behind Jesus, following him, and not in front obstructing the path to wisdom and life.

Our bitter experience of global conflicts in recent decades should make us wary of accepting militaristic messiahs. In our times, to know and follow Jesus as the Christos or Messiah is to seek and support more moderate and lasting responses to perceived injustice. It is to listen to the wisdom of those with insight and experience, to calculate with the utmost care the consequences of violent reactions to the problems in our world, in contemporary society, and in our homes. That may well involve hard work, personal misunderstanding, physical and emotional trauma or, in other words, it may mean "losing one's life" for the sake of the gospel. It certainly calls for profound trust in the saving power of God. Over the next few weeks, the Sunday gospels will call us into the ways of respect, of commitment, and of peaceful negotiation, to ever deeper insight into the ways of Jesus the Christ, the anointed agent of God's empire.

**Reflection on the Gospel-25th Sunday in Ordinary Time Year B
(Mark 9:30-37)**

-Veronica Lawson RSM

Most of us have to admit to being like the disciples whom Jesus was trying to bring from blindness and ignorance to insight and understanding. Like them, we are often afraid to ask for explanations when we fear that we may not be able to deal with the responses we receive. We so often choose to live in denial. No matter how strongly Jesus insists that the way of the gospel will lead to his violent death, his closest followers persist in their refusal to accept the inevitability of suffering in the life of one who so openly challenges abuses of power.

More focussed on personal recognition and status, the “twelve” engage in a childish argument about who is the greatest among them. They are inside “the house” in Capernaum, the home of Jesus. They are understandably silent when Jesus questions them about the discussion they had “on the way”. They have much to learn and he needs their attention if they are to understand who he is and what it means to be his disciple. They need to learn that being first has nothing to do with seeking the limelight, with hierarchy or status, with power or adulation. It has everything to do with engaging in ministry without distinction or discrimination, with being “servant of all”. Like us, they may also have much to learn from “the way” itself, the path they tread through the land.

An engaging scene follows this discussion. They are “inside the house”, an open house where all are welcome. Jesus places a child in their midst. The child is unnamed. We might give this child a name so that she or he is a real person for us. Jesus seemingly gathers the twelve in a circle around him. Taking the child in his arms, he tries to show them that gospel leadership resides, not in privilege, but in the welcome offered to those whose voices are rarely heard and whose needs are frequently ignored.

Jesus, the suffering Messiah, actually identifies with a defenceless child, “Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me”. His identification with the defenceless is as intimate as his identification with God, “the one who sent me”. As a church, we might well hear today’s gospel story as a call to respond with compassion and justice to those who have suffered the indignity and injustice of abuse in their childhood. We might hear it as an invitation to listen to the cry of our sisters and brothers who continue to seek the dignity and justice that belong to all of God’s people. We might learn from the five high profile Australians, the “filthy rich and homeless”, who lived for a time with the nation’s most vulnerable and called us all to commit to ways of being that might enable all to live in dignity and hope.

**Reflection on the Gospel-26th Sunday in Ordinary Time Year B
(Mark 9:38-48)**

-Veronica M. Lawson RSM

Sometimes we act and speak as though we have the monopoly on access to the power of God although we have no such monopoly. In today's gospel Jesus seems to be telling his disciples that God works through people of good will, irrespective of whether they are on the edge ("not one of us") or at the centre of the kingdom of God movement. Much the same message is found in the first reading from the Book of Numbers which has Joshua, assistant to Moses, trying to exclude two men from prophesying on somewhat tenuous grounds.

Moses does not take Joshua's advice. On the contrary, he prays that the Spirit of God might "rest on" and, by implication, work through all of God's people. Both the gospel passage and the reading from Numbers seem to be warning against attempts to control or domesticate the Spirit of God. The second part of the gospel reading (9:42-48) brings a dramatic change of mood as it takes up the issue of scandalising the "little ones". The reference to "little ones" marks a return to the scene in the latter part of last week's gospel reading where Jesus takes a little child in his arms and instructs his disciples.

The horror of harming the little ones is dramatised in a series of sayings that challenge the most vivid imagination. These sayings are hardly intended to be taken literally. Cutting off offending limbs only deals with the symptoms. It may, however, offer some solace to those little ones who have suffered "scandal" or worse to know that there is no stronger condemnation in the gospels than that reserved for those who bring harm to children and to vulnerable others. We are impelled to do everything in our power to heal the hurts of the past and to create conditions that ensure the protection and safety of our children.

The provision of secure and affordable housing for vulnerable families is one response to this gospel challenge. Today is Social Justice Sunday in Australian Catholic communities. In their choice of title for the 2018-2019 Social Justice Statement, the Australian bishops remind us that everyone needs a place to call home. The escalating cost of housing and of rental properties has accelerated the problem of homelessness. Homelessness, they insist, "is a challenge for all levels of society: for government, for Church and community, and for us as individuals. Each one of us can make a difference and, when we join with others, we can be a real force for change..." To take up the challenge of addressing homelessness is to accept the invitation of Pope Francis to live the eighth work of mercy. It involves imagination and industry. It means visualising new possibilities and engaging in simple daily gestures that have the potential to bring life to the "little ones" of this world.

**Reflection on the Gospel-27th Sunday in Ordinary Time Year B
(Mark 10:2-16)**

-Veronica Lawson RSM

The question of gender inclusivity in decision-making has been much in the news of late. The maleness of political and church institutions has been highlighted in my country as a serious contributor to the disorder that finds expression in both bullying and abuse. Since the creation of patriarchy in the Bronze Age, some 3000 years ago, lack of gender inclusivity has posed a challenge, particularly for those who find themselves excluded.

The “test” question about divorce that the Pharisees put to Jesus is very strange in a first century Jewish context, as is the reference to women divorcing their husbands. While there is no evidence that anyone in Jewish circles questioned the legality of divorce, there is plenty of evidence for lively debate concerning the grounds on which a Jewish man could divorce his wife: adultery; inferior cooking; even diminished beauty! There were various schools of thought. Jewish law, unlike Roman law, however, did not permit women to initiate divorce proceedings on any grounds at all. From the perspective of the Markan Jesus, Moses only *permitted* divorce as a concession to “hardness of heart”: it was not so from the beginning. The ideal, he insists, is expressed in the Garden Story of Genesis, the story of “one flesh”, of partnership, of equality and mutuality, of enduring commitment in marriage. The Hebrew word *'ezer* which is translated as “helper” in the first reading from Genesis is used in the Psalms of God’s relationship to Israel. It does not denote inferiority of women to men as is sometimes suggested. A better translation might be “companion”.

Human limitation is just as much a reality now as it was in the ancient world. We strive for the ideal but fall far short of it in so many ways. When this happens in marriage, the consequences can be more far-reaching than in other aspects of our lives. The parties involved become the “little ones” whose lives are shattered and disoriented. The embrace of the community is needed in a particular way for everyone affected by divorce, especially the children. When parents part company, the best interests and needs of the children are sometimes forgotten. Too often, those who have experienced the trauma of divorce feel alienated from the worshipping community, and this at a time when they need the courage to face a different future from the one they had envisaged.

The story about marital commitment leads immediately into a story about Jesus taking the children in his arms and blessing them, despite the disciples’ attempts to send them away. Children are important persons who are never to be excluded from the inner circles of love and compassion. We might hear today’s gospel as a call to be inclusive in all our relationships and to remember the children no matter what happens.

**Reflection on the Gospel-28th Sunday in Ordinary Time Year B
(Mark 10:17-30)**

-Veronica Lawson RSM

Not too many of us commit murder or adultery. Not too many take hostages or give false testimony in a court of law. Most are ready to honour and care for their parents in their old age. In other words, most of us are basically decent and honest and could make the same claim as does the wealthy man who runs up to Jesus, namely that we have kept the commandments from our youth. The man's question is actually a strange one. He wants to know what he must *do* in order to inherit eternal life. He seems unaware that inheritance depends, not on what one does, but on who one is. Jesus responds to his greeting, "Good Teacher", with a reminder that God is the source of all goodness, and then lets him know that keeping the commandments is not enough. Interestingly, Jesus adds a commandment that is not actually numbered among the "ten" but is to be found in an Essene document from Qumran: "You shall not defraud". This prepares the way for what follows.

First-century Mediterranean societies were "limited goods" societies. If a person acquired wealth, it was invariably understood to be at the expense of others. The wealthy were therefore looked upon with suspicion. Although Jesus looks at the man lovingly, he may nonetheless be hinting that this person's wealth has been acquired fraudulently. Jesus offers a challenge that the man is unable to meet: to sell what he has, give the proceeds to the poor, have "treasure in heaven", and "follow" him. The man retains his possessions and acquires a burden, the burden of sorrow. To share one's goods with those in need is too hard for some, Jesus admits, but not for those who are open to the power of God at work in their lives.

The concluding verses are puzzling. In declaring that those who have left everything and followed him are to have an abundance of this world's goods as well as eternal life, is Jesus modifying his earlier position? Is he reverting to a tradition that saw wealth as God's reward for righteous living? Is he suggesting that those who share their goods find they have more than enough? It is hard to know. The twist in the tale is that they will do it hard: "not without persecution". It is likely that Mark is describing his own experience within a persecuted community of believers some forty years after the death of Jesus. The happy ones were doubtless those who took the risk of sharing their goods with those in need. Our lucky country has still to learn that lesson. Welcoming the stranger and sharing our wealth with the dispossessed may demand of us a simpler way of life. Who knows what blessings it will bring if we dare to take up the challenge?

**Reflection on the Gospel-29th Sunday in Ordinary Time Year B
(Mark 10:35-45)**

-Veronica Lawson RSM

In the kingdom of God movement established by Jesus, there is no place for domination or for any exercise of power over others. In today's gospel story, this is a lesson that James and John, the sons of Zebedee, clearly need to learn. They seem to think that the structures of power operating in the Roman world are going to be replicated when Jesus conquers the forces of opposition and comes into his "glory". The two brothers, James and John, put in a bid for shared deputy leadership positions. They seem to be blind and deaf to what Jesus has been trying to tell them throughout their journey from Caesarea Philippi to Jerusalem. They seek his patronage without reference to the rest of the leadership group who, incidentally, are not well pleased with their presumptuous companions.

James and John do not yet realise that Jesus' way is not the way of status or entitlement and that their call as disciples and as leaders of the emerging movement has nothing to do with privilege. They need to understand that it has more to do with enduring the suffering associated with commitment to one's mission, and with setting others free to be their best selves. To demonstrate this, Jesus offers them an unpalatable alternative: to "be slave of all". He sustains the slavery metaphor and goes on to summarise his own mission with an image that comes out of the world of his time: "not to be served but to serve and give life as a ransom for many". A ransom was the payment made to free someone from slavery. To substitute oneself for a slave was to give one's life as a ransom for that slave. Reading the gospel from beginning to end helps us to understand the ultimate self-giving of Jesus in death as the climax of a lifetime's outpouring of love, a love that draws forth loving and liberating action in others.

There are multiple ways of enslaving others, of dominating and of trying to control them in order to achieve one's own personal or corporate ends, good or bad. The request of James and John reminds us that we can all lose sight of the liberating vision of the gospel and get caught up in destructive power struggles. As 21st century disciples, we hear the words of Jesus, 'It is not to happen with you'. We might turn our attention to those in our world who are literally enslaved. We might join with ACRATH (Australian Catholic Religious against the Trafficking in Humans) or with others working to obtain freedom and justice for those trapped into sexual and other forms of slavery in our own cities. We might hear today's gospel as a call to do something about this tragic phenomenon.

**Reflection on the Gospel-30th Sunday in Ordinary Time Year B
(Mark 10:46-52)**

-Veronica Lawson RSM

What is it that we fail to see? Today's gospel reading brings to closure a long section of Mark's gospel that focuses on the journey of Jesus and his disciples from Caesarea Philippi in the north to Jericho in the south. Jericho is the final staging point in the journey to Jerusalem where the final act of the gospel drama will be played out. This section of the gospel (8:27-10:52) is prefaced by the story of a blind man who comes to sight in stages and ends with the story of another blind man, Bartimaeus, who comes from blindness to sight, as well as from insight to greater insight, and joins Jesus on the journey to Jerusalem. On the intervening journey, Jesus endeavours to lead the Twelve out of their metaphorical blindness into an understanding of what it means to follow a suffering messiah. They remain for some time in their blindness, as subsequent events will demonstrate.

The narrator creates an impression of urgency at this point in Mark's gospel. "They" come to Jericho and then leave. The intervention of Bartimaeus, who tries to attract the attention of Jesus by calling out from the roadside, threatens to delay the journey. When he cries out for mercy, many "rebuke" him. This is a strong word. It is used of people in the crowd who neither share the depth of Bartimaeus' faith nor grasp the nature of Jesus' mission of gathering in "the remnant of Israel, among them the blind and the lame" (Jeremiah 31:8). Those who try to silence Bartimaeus are a bit like the family of Jesus who tried to protect him from himself (Mark 3:31).

When it is clear that the perception of the "many" is not shared by Jesus, we have an almost comical scene in which they do a complete about-face. It seems they want to please the authority figure no matter what. Bartimaeus offers a stark contrast to these people. He knows that Jesus has the power to bring the mercy of God into his life and the lives of those who wait by the roadside with faith in their hearts. He receives the assurance from Jesus that his faith has made him well.

We can probably find some reflection of ourselves in all the characters in today's story. At times we are aware of our blindness and wait desperately by the roadside for the right person or circumstances to come along and give us the heart to rise up and live the journey of faith. At times, we are like the many who think we know what is best for others and who try to silence the voices of those who interfere with our plans. At other times, we respond to the cries for mercy and stretch out our hands to gather in those whose disabilities might otherwise exclude them.

**Reflection on the Gospel-31st Sunday in Ordinary Time Year B
(Mark 12:28-34)**

-Veronica Lawson RSM

In today's gospel reading we encounter a good scribe, while in next week's we find some not so good scribes. This seems to fit the pattern of the Markan gospel. There are faithful disciples and not so faithful disciples. There are honest Jewish leaders like Joseph of Arimathea and not so honest leaders like those who try to entrap Jesus. There are principled Romans like the centurion who witnesses the death of Jesus, and not so principled Romans like Pilate who condemns him to death.

Goodness and fitness for the 'kin-dom' or 'empire of God' are never guaranteed, according to the Markan schema, by status or position or call or ethnicity or gender or by any other contingency of existence. Everyone has choices, as Andrea is constantly reminded by her boyfriend Nate in "The Devil Wears Prada." For a Jew, the first and best choice is to love the God of Israel with one's whole being and then to love one's neighbour as oneself. Jesus and his questioner are agreed on that. Jesus is presented in today's gospel as a Jew who knows and observes the Law of Moses. He wins the respect of the scribe, a specialist in the Law, who has overheard him debating with the Sadducees.

Jesus recognises the sincerity of the scribe and takes seriously the question that this teacher of the Law puts to him, "Which commandment is the first of all?" He responds in the words of the "Shema Israel" from Deuteronomy 6, today's first reading. Love of God comes first. It is a love that derives from gratitude for God's liberating action in the lives of God's people. Israel has known the unconditional love of God. Those who know anything about human behaviour would probably agree that the experience of unconditional love engenders an increased capacity for love. For the Jews, including those who throw in their lot with Jesus the Jewish Galilean, to love one's neighbour is to keep the second commandment of Leviticus 19:18, "...you shall love your neighbor as yourself".

In first-century Judaism, love of God was expressed in worship and in the prayers and rituals of daily life. Love of others likewise found expression in action, not only in care of family and close friends, but also in support of "the poor and the needy and the stranger." To seek peace was also a feature of neighbourly love. To accept and follow such a program is to be, with the scribe, "not far from" God's kin-dom or empire. Contemporary sensibilities might lead us to include the other-than-human among the neighbours or "kin" we are called to love. If we learn to love the earth and all that inhabits it, the birds and the beasts, the plants and the soil, the sky and the sea, then we are more likely to tread lightly upon it.

**Reflection on the Gospel-32nd Sunday in Ordinary Time Year B
(Mark 12:38-44)**

-Veronica Lawson RSM

Whether the longer or shorter gospel reading is selected for today's liturgy, the literary context deserves attention. Jesus is teaching the crowds in the Jerusalem Temple. He knows the vulnerability of many of the people around him and issues a warning about the grandiose behaviour of the Jerusalem scribes. The scribes were generally learned men on whom the people relied for rulings in matters of sacred law as well as for drawing up contracts and other important documents. They commanded the respect of many of the people. Jesus is not impressed by the behaviour of some of the scribes. He sees their pomposity as a mask for dishonesty and exploitation: they will receive the "greater condemnation". They "devour the houses of widows" and hide behind the pretext of long prayers. Widows included women who had lost their husbands through death or divorce as well as single unmarried women. They were women alone without male protection in a patriarchal society and without the benefit of a social security system. They were dependent for survival upon the care of family and community. Jesus' words of condemnation are strong words that will understandably provoke a reaction. It is no surprise that the Jerusalem scribes are among those who later conspire to kill him (Mark 14:1).

It is easy enough to be taken in by the posturing of those who present as superior and who look for status recognition. It is also easy to miss the goodness of those on the edge even if it is happening before our very eyes. The context presents Jesus as attuned to the plight of the widows. He now notices and draws the attention of his disciples to the action of one particular "destitute" widow. Her tiny contribution to the treasury of two copper coins for the upkeep of the Temple is far more significant than the big sums contributed by the wealthy out of their excess. Is this woman being presented as the victim of an unjust system that extracts from her what she cannot afford, as some commentators insist? Or is the Markan Jesus presenting her as a free agent, a model of discipleship, who offers everything she has to live on? It may not be necessary to choose between these two interpretations. It is clear that this woman's action provides a striking contrast to that of the scribes, like the action of another woman who, a little later in the story, breaks a precious jar and pours an abundance of healing ointment over the head of Jesus as he faces the prospect of death. As the gospel draws to a close, then, we find two stories of extravagantly generous unnamed women, stories told in memory of their gospel foolishness.

**Reflection on the Gospel-33rd Sunday in Ordinary Time Year B
(Mark 13:24-32)**

-Veronica Lawson RSM

In the opening lines of today's gospel reading, there are clear echoes of two passages from the prophecy of Isaiah. The first passage reads, "For the stars of the heavens and their constellations will not give their light; the sun will be dark at its rising, and the moon will not shed its light" (Isaiah 13:10). These images from Isaiah read like an unravelling of God's work in creation. The second passage likewise predicts a scenario that seems to reverse the Genesis creation account: "All the host of heaven [the constellations] shall rot away, and the skies roll up like a scroll. All their host shall wither like a leaf withering on a vine, or fruit withering on a fig tree" (Isaiah 34:4). The prophet is using powerful poetic imagery to speak of God's judgment on the people of Israel who have strayed from their covenant relationship.

The parallel images in Mark 13 are referenced to the aftermath of the "time of distress" associated with the destruction of Jerusalem, a time of intense suffering for the community of believers. Jesus tells his disciples that, after all their suffering, strange cosmic phenomena will signal his return in glory and usher in a new age for God's people when the faithful will be gathered in. The message is intended to give comfort and hope to Mark's persecuted community of the late sixties or early seventies of the first century. Just as the new leaves on the fig tree signal the approach of summer, so too will the strange signs in the heavens signal Christ's coming and the onset of a new era, an end to the "time of distress". The message is thus one of encouragement for the community as they face an uncertain future rather than one of judgment.

The strange apocalyptic imagery and the ancient cosmology that has Jesus returning on the clouds need not distract the modern and scientifically sophisticated reader from hearing the call to trust in God no matter what happens. This reading may remind some of us that the unravelling of God's work is more than a poetic image in our times. The freak storms, the cyclones, and other signs of global warming we have seen might well serve as reminders to attend more carefully to the preservation of planet Earth. We may also hear a call to pay closer attention to what the "other-than-human" Earth elements can tell us about God and God's ways.

Tim Winton's memoir, *Island Home*, offers a contemporary reminder of who we are as planetary beings, of what we have done to our planet and of how attentiveness to land and landscape is integral to being who we are. The wild fig or the black-flanked rock wallabies, for instance, may be more eloquent teachers than we had ever realised.

**Reflection on the Gospel-Feast of Christ the King, Year B
(John 18:33-37)**

-Veronica Lawson RSM

The liturgical year always ends with the celebration of the Feast of Christ the King. The gospel reading for Year B is from John's gospel where the notion of God's kin-dom or reign or empire features only twice in contrast with its frequent appearance in the other gospels, especially Matthew. For readers in a Western society where democratic rule is valued and promoted, the whole notion of kingship or monarchy poses some difficulty. We need to put the exchange between Jesus and Pilate into the political context of Roman occupied Judaea of the first century.

Rome was the dominant global force at that time. It had the economic and military strength to maintain its power over the whole Mediterranean world. When Jesus tells Pilate that his kingdom is not of this world, he is not pitting planet Earth or the cosmos over against a purely spiritual world. He is referring rather to the world and values of the Roman Empire and the destructive values that are sometimes espoused by his followers. Jesus' way of being in the world stands in stark contrast with the expansionist and frequently destructive ways of Roman rule.

The term "world" is used in two different senses in John's gospel, both literally and metaphorically. On the one hand, it is the world that came into being through the Word (1:10), the beautiful cosmos or world that "God so loved" (3:16). On the other hand, it is a "world" that rejected the light (1:10-11), a sinful world in need of the saving power of God (3:17).

Jesus, as king, does not claim the sort of over-bearing political, military or economic power that Pilate exercises on behalf of the Roman emperor. His authority has nothing to do with power over or domination of others. It is grounded in truth (1:17) or, in other words, in the revelation of God. Jesus is "the way, the truth and the life" (14:6) and his mission is to testify to the truth. The path to freedom and life lies in acceptance of the truth (8:32): "If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free."

To celebrate this feast, then, is to move in the direction of peaceful solutions to the conflicts in our world and away from the paths of violence and domination. It is to seek the truth in dialogue and to respond to the plight of those who suffer the pain of hunger, of persecution and of loss. It is to rule as God rules and not as Rome ruled. It is to look again at how we inhabit our world and to change our ways for the sake of truth and life, the present and future life of our beleaguered planet.