In today’s reading from the letter to the Ephesians, St Paul invites us to reflect for a moment on our lives and to do it from the perspective of God. “God has chosen us in Christ,” he says, “before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love.”

Our lives involve all kinds of things – work and friendship, marriage and the family; responsibilities to one another and to the broader society. We all experience some measure of happiness and sadness, success and failure. These are just some human. The apostle is not denying their importance; what he is saying is that there is another dimension to life, something that both grounds it and gives it its ultimate meaning.

When I work or spent time with friends, or visit art galleries, I am at the same time, even if I don’t think of it, living out my relationship to the mystery of God, He called us into being and endowed us with whatever capacities we have. It is he who urges us to become the kind of creatures that from the beginning he intended us to be.

For me as a Christian, central to my relationship to God is the person and life of Jesus. It is in Christ, Paul insists, that God has called us “to be holy” and to live in love.

In the Old Testament, holiness is something that is attributed in a special way to God. In the book of Leviticus, there is a section known as “The Holiness Code.” It begins: “Be holy as the Lord your God is holy.”

We evoke God’s holiness as well as that of Christ in every Mass as we say or sing the “Holy, Holy, Holy” that leads us into the Eucharistic prayer.

It was the acute sense that the Israelites had of God’s holiness that inspired them to insist on respect for the temple, its sacrificial cult, and the priests and others who served it. The insistence on “Remembering the Sabbath day to keep it holy” became a distinguishing feature of the Jewish tradition.

In both the Old and the New Testaments holiness points to the fundamental nature of God, his transcendence and all powerfulness, his wisdom and beauty. For us, Christ shares in that same holiness. The Glory to God we recited a few moments ago declares of the Son of God “You alone are the Holy One.

In the Christian tradition, there is less emphasis on the holiness of places and things and more on the holiness of people.

The Second Vatican Council in its document on the nature and mission of the Church includes a chapter entitled, “The Universal Call to Holiness.”

Traditionally we have tended to think of saints or people we would call holy as those who have been canonized. They have often been priests or religious, people who lived unusual lives, whether in a monastery or convent or on the missions or in some form of life-long dedication to the sick and the poor

If Christ is the Holy One, the one in whom we encounter in human form something of the holiness of God, then we as members of his body share in his holiness.

Christian holiness involves both God’s gift and our response to that gift. The gift comes to us in many ways, in the word of Scripture, in the sacraments, especially baptism and the Eucharist, in the life of the people we meet, including in some cases the people with whom we live and work.

In the world today, people live in many different ways, have different life styles. There is, however, only one holiness. The Council document defines it in terms of what it calls the “perfection of charity” or love. In doing so, it evokes the teaching of Jesus and in particular what he says about the twofold commandment of love of God and love of neighbour. It also recalls the statement of Jesus at the Last Supper, “This is my commandment that you love one another as I have loved you.”

St Paul suggests the kind of qualities that distinguish a person of genuine holiness when he writes, “As God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness and patience. … Above all”, he insists, “clothe yourselves with love. … And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts.”

As we struggle to deal with our failings as individuals and as church, we are invited to deepen our awareness of ourselves as members of the Body of Christ, called in him to holiness of life.