

OLAS SCRIPTURE COMMENTARIES FEBRUARY 2024

Sunday February 4th FIFTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

First Reading Job 7:1-4,6-7 - The book of Job is a fictional rather simplistic attempt to address the problem of suffering. In the ancient world misfortune was often seen as God's punishment for sin, either collectively, as when the nation suffered defeat at the hands of an enemy, or individually, when a person fell ill, was crippled or blinded. There had to be explanations for these catastrophes and sin was the obvious answer - failure to follow God's laws. In the story God allows Satan, the "devil's advocate" of the heavenly court, to test Job's fidelity. He loses successively everything he holds dear, even his family, are taken from him. Will he turn his anger on the Almighty? To add to his woes his so-called friends gather to question him about what wickedness he's committed to merit such misfortune. It is simplistic because in the end Job's faithfulness is rewarded by abundant replacement of everything he had lost: real life isn't like that.

Second Reading I Corinthians 9:16-19,22-23 - Paul is anxious to show himself as being prepared to get alongside anyone from no matter background or condition in life. This is how he fulfils the duty God has laid on him. He doesn't charge for his services as a preacher although he might quite reasonably have expected his congregation to cover bed and board and travelling expenses. Rather he prides himself on being at the service of everyone, just as a slave is totally at the beck and call of the master. We know from other sources that Paul was by trade a tent maker- a useful occupation in an age without B&B, or motels for travellers.

Gospel Mark 1:29-39 - Mark's gospel is filled with a sense of urgency, as this passage well illustrates. We should note how Jesus devotes himself to the needs of those who come to him. Although the writer refers to individual physical and mental diseases it's easy to understand this as being symbolic of Jesus' teaching being the source of healing for all of broken humanity. Jewish religious Law insisted on the need for the worshipper to be whole and entire: even animal sacrifices had to be unblemished. The Gospel writer is using these stories of healing to point directly to the mission of Jesus being one of restoration to the community of Israel whole and entire. Our Pope Francis talks about the need for the Church to recognise itself as "messy" - not a community of lovely examples of holy sanctity but the lame, the blind, the diseased looking for wholeness. Again, a feature of this Gospel, it is the evil spirits who penetrate the secret of Jesus' identity.

Sunday February 11th SIXTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

First Reading Leviticus 13: 1-2, 44-46 - Leviticus isn't a book you'd turn to for a spot of light reading, obsessed as it is with the rigmarole of correct Temple worship. It is only being used in today's Eucharistic celebration because of its reference to the strictures the Law placed on those whom our translators describe as "lepers." Hansen's disease, what we call true leprosy today, is a degenerative disease in which the sufferer progressively loses sensation in extremities which atrophy. Today the progress of the disease can be halted with correct treatment, though there's nothing able to restore lost fingers and toes. The Hebrew word translated as "leprosy" appears to have covered all sorts of diseases other than the Hansen's disease we know as leprosy today. What Leviticus appears to be dealing with are skin conditions that can offer remission. The whole point of the legislation is that only an unblemished person is fit to offer true worship to God.

Second Reading I Corinthians 10:31 -11:1 - Paul's admonition to his Corinthian converts was that the whole of their ordinary everyday events should be a reflection of God's goodness. He was writing to a mixed community of Jews and Gentiles. The Jews had strict rules about what was permitted in the way of food and drink and the exclusion of pagans from your dining table. Paul's plea for tolerance would bear more heavily upon his Jewish converts but the Greek converts who had been used to getting a bit of brisket or fillet steak from the back door of the local temple (left over from sacrifices) might have to moderate their behaviour so not to give offence. His message is really do whatever benefits the whole community of believers.

Gospel Mark 1:40-45 - "Feeling sorry" is a weak translation of the word which expresses anger at the man's misfortune and isolation. The man was ritually impure, unable to take part in public worship and Jesus' action restored him to his rightful place in the community. Mark's Gospel shows exceptional respect for traditional Jewish Law: to illustrate that the man is restored to society, he is ordered to show himself to the Temple priests who will be able to declare him cured and allow him to take part in the Temple worship by making a sacrificial offering. The leper, outcast, unwanted, represents all that is wrong with a world alienated from God.

The need for prayer and solitude is a recurrent theme in the gospel but Jesus' attempt to retreat from the crowds is thwarted by their desire to seek him out. The secret of Jesus – we have already seen how the forces of evil recognise the source of his power more readily than the crowds who flock to him – is emphasised once more in this narrative of healing, though the cured leper inadvertently, becomes a sort of apostle because he can't stop talking about what Jesus has done for him.

Wednesday February 14th ASH WEDNESDAY

First Reading: Joel 2:12-18 - Today's reading paints a dramatic picture of the disillusion experienced by the Jewish people after the Exile in Babylon, the euphoria of the return has worn off, disasters have overtaken the nation – in this instance a devastating plague of locusts. Joel urges the nation to turn back to the God they have neglected. He will not abandon them.

Second Reading: II Corinthians 5:20-6:2

Paul must have been very fond of these new converts in the cosmopolitan city of Corinth, though their misguided enthusiasm tried him sorely. There were people claiming spiritual gifts, offering private insights that clashed violently with Paul's idea of what life in Christ really meant – reconciliation with God means being at one with God, sharing in his glory. He appeals to his Corinthian converts not to neglect God's gift.

Gospel: Matthew 6:1-6, 16-18 - We have to remember that in the society of Jesus' day it was customary to be very demonstrative, as it still is in some parts of the world: "sackcloth and ashes" isn't just an expression, people did, and still do, tear their clothes, wail and weep in reaction to misfortune. At the Temple in Jerusalem trumpets were sounded when an especially large sum was deposited in the collection box. Jesus advises a radically different way of doing good – in secret: the almsgiver shouldn't know what the other hand is doing, the door to the prayer room should be shut and the one who is fasting should make it look as though she's dolled up for a party. So, a question for us as we leave church today, what about those ashes on our foreheads?

Sunday February 18th FIRST SUNDAY IN LENT

First Reading: Genesis 9:8-15 - Why this choice of reading for today? It is worth remembering that the season of Lent began as the final stage of preparation by those who were getting ready for Baptism at the Easter celebration. Descending into the water, the newly baptised emerged as a new creation. Stories of a mythological Great Flood are found in other Middle Eastern literature as well as in the Book of Genesis. In the biblical version Noah and his family emerge from the ark to what is in effect new life. The theme of water, as a destructive force and also as a means of providing life is vividly illustrated in the story (as it is in other parts of the Old Testament; the passage through the Reed Sea in the story of the escape from Egypt,

for example). Christians could use the story to illustrate what baptism meant to them: the water of baptism is symbolic of the casting off old ways and entry into a new life, a new relationship with God.

Second Reading: I Peter 3:18-22 - This letter is addressed to newly baptised Christians. A word of explanation. The writer of this letter shared the ancient belief in "Sheol" a shadowy underworld inhabited by the souls of the dead. He (we presume the writer was male) was simply reinforcing the reality of Jesus's death when he wrote about Jesus "preaching to the souls in prison" (it is a pity that the medieval English translation of the Apostles' Creed which we still use refers to Jesus "descending into Hell"). The writer sees the story of the Flood as illustrating what baptism is all about. His newly baptised readers (we have to remember that baptism was for adults) didn't go down into the baptismal pool (total immersion, symbolic of death) to be washed clean of physical grime but rise from the waters, brought to new life in Christ

Gospel: Mark 1:12-15 - Mark's gospel, comparatively short, lacking in detail, at times almost breathless in the speed of the narrative, opens dramatically. Today's brief reading follows immediately on from the account of Jesus' baptism by John. Jesus undergoes a time of testing: forty days (forty- a classic biblical way of describing a time of preparation - think of Moses and Elijah) in the wilderness. The reference to the wild beasts and the angels serves to emphasise his isolation and total dependence of His Father's care. "Satan" is understood as a sort of prosecuting counsel in God's court (which is the purpose he serves in the Book of Job) with the task of trying to find the weak spot in a subject's armour. Jesus emerges from this testing time with a clear understanding of his mission – to call the people to "repent" , which means to turn around their lives.

Sunday February 25th SECOND SUNDAY OF LENT

First Reading: Genesis 22:1-2, 9-13, 15-18 - By our standards, God's demand seems totally barbaric: Isaac was the miraculous child of Abraham and Sarah's old age. We need to try to understand the story as someone might have interpreted it two and a half thousand years ago. The Lord God holds everything in his power. By obeying what he believes to be God's command, Abraham is showing his utter dependence on God. By his revelation that the boy is to be spared, God renews his promise that Abraham is to be the founder, the "father" of countless generations. There might have been a secondary purpose in telling the story: infant sacrifice was not uncommon and the religious tradition that the first-born male child was dedicated to God and had to be "redeemed" by sacrifice (a pair of turtle doves or two young pigeons) might have an echo of a grisly prehistoric practice,

Second Reading: Romans 8:31-34 - The story of Abraham's readiness to sacrifice his son in obedience to God resonated with the first Christians trying to make sense of the abominable death to which Jesus had been put. God promises Abraham had countless descendants because of his obedience. Jesus' obedience to his Father brings even greater consequences: making us right with God. Paul uses a rather bizarre

imagery of a court of law: (The sacrificed) Jesus is now like a defending counsel, convincing the judge of the innocence of his client.

Gospel: Mark 9:2-10 - To use modern technical language, Mark's teaching is encrypted: "Mountain" - think of Sinai where Moses sees the presence of God. "Transfigured, dazzling white" - in the Sinai story, the presence of God is overwhelming so no one can see God and live. "Moses & Elijah" - the two great prophets who interpreted the will of God to the people of the Covenant. "The Cloud" - the veil that hides the presence of God from mere mortals. This is a vision of the Jesus whom the disciples walked with and ate with, shared the toil and pains of everyday life, revealed beneath it all as the one who shares the divine life of his Father.