

HOLY WEEK SCRIPTURE COMMENTARIES

Thursday 28th March MAUNDY THURSDAY

First Reading: Exodus 12:1-8, 11-14 - This story of the first Passover draws on centuries of older traditions in which a pastoral festival, centred on the sacrificial offering and eating of the lamb, and an agricultural festival celebrated by the eating of unleavened bread, first fruits of the harvest, came together to commemorate both freedom from the Egyptian slavery and possession of the Promised Land. This was the highlight of Jewish religious life. when the people could reaffirm their solidarity with each other and with God. It's worth remembering that our Communion is intended to also be just that: our solidarity with the life in Christ and with each other.

Second Reading: I Corinthians 11:23-26 - The earliest celebrations of the Eucharist was in the form of a meal. In Corinth each group brought its own food and drink and the well-off who could afford good food were neglecting the needs of the poor among them. By way of contrast, Paul repeats what he had taught them about the Lord's Supper, which we now recognise as being the substance of our own prayer of consecration.

Gospel: John 13:1-15 - Imagine our Sunday celebration centring on the priest washing the feet of the congregation! Would that have been the form it might have taken if John's gospel were our only witness to the Last Supper? In Luke's account of the Last Supper, Jesus asks who is the greater, the one who eats at table or the one who serves and goes on to describe himself as being among them as a servant. John's gospel puts those words into dramatic action.

Friday 29th March GOOD FRIDAY LITURGY

First Reading Isaiah 52:53 – 53:12 - The author, writing at the end of the Babylonian Exile, had in mind a personification of the faithful ones of Israel who have born all sorts of suffering but who in the end will be vindicated in the sight of God. In Christian tradition this passage has been seen as seen as prophetic of the mission of Christ and it seems more than likely that the text was in the minds of those who put together the Passion narratives of the Gospels.

Second Reading: Hebrews 4:14-16; 5:7-9 - In Jesus, Son of God, we have the supreme high priest, who in his humanity has shared our condition. Today's reading is a cobbling together of separate verses and though there is enough here to help us reflect on the significance for us of the suffering and death of Jesus one needs to read the whole passage to better appreciate the richness of the thoughts expressed.

Gospel: John 18:1-19, 42 - In Jewish thought the name revealed the true identity of the person. "I am he" reminds us of the revelation of God in the story of the burning bush. The mob, regardless of ethnic origins, is a dangerous beast and easily manipulated. In Hebrew, "King" means Messiah or Anointed One, which in Greek is "Christos". The Messiah would be the king to lead his nation to glory. But this king doesn't lay claim to a realm in earthly terms. John's Gospel puts Mary at the foot of the cross, placed by her dying son in the care of the "loving disciple." Christian piety sees this as her becoming the spiritual mother of all the faithful, here represented by John.

Saturday 30th March THE EASTER VIGIL

A word of explanation. Easter has always been the time for Baptism when new believers rise to new life in the Lord. Our readings attempt to trace the history of salvation.

First Reading: Genesis 1:1 –2:2 - In the Biblical account of Creation the will of God is expressed in his enabling Word. The creation story is fitted into the framework of a seven-day week. The division of time into weeks of seven days was almost certainly borrowed from the ancient Babylonians. In the story we have here it neatly provides an explanation of the Sabbath (our Saturday)) as being the day to make holy by resting from labour. We are reminded of Jesus' comment that the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.

Second Reading: Genesis 22:1-18 - Abraham, having faith in the promise of God that he would be the founder of a great nation, has been called out of his own country. And now he is called upon to sacrifice his

only son Isaac, his sole assurance of the promise being fulfilled. The writer would not have shared our horror at the barbaric demand for human sacrifice, he wanted to demonstrate Abraham's utter obedience to the will of God.

Third Reading: Exodus 14:15 – 15:1 - Water has both negative and positive symbolism and nowhere is this demonstrated better than in the account of the flight of the Israelites and the destruction of the pursuing army – it signified life for some, death for others. Whatever the precise historical origins of this story, the drama is gripping and the message abundantly clear: it is the Lord who is the Saviour of his people.

Fifth Reading: Isaiah 55:1-11 - This follows on from the previous reading. Isaiah's vision of life in the new dispensation has so many overtones for us: the water turned into wine at Cana; the feeding of the five thousand; the promise of the true bread from heaven; the disciples of Jesus will be witnesses to the whole world.

Seventh Reading: Ezekiel 36:16-17(a), 18-28 - This offers a brief resumé of the Exile and the return as a vindication of the holiness of God. It is perhaps the closing sentences that should resonate most with us: the promise to give a new heart and spirit, taking away the “heart of stone”.

Romans:6:3-11 - This extract from Paul's letter to the Christian community in Rome is a powerful explanation of what baptism means for us: a death to our old life and a resurrection to a new life as children of God.. The symbolism is all the more powerful if we remember that baptism in the early Church was by total immersion and for adults who were freely choosing this path. For the majority of us, baptised as babies, the signification isn't so clear. We didn't ask to be baptised, our growth in the spiritual life has depended to a large extent on the upbringing we received as children. We sort of "grow" into the faith and sometimes the growth is irregular.

Gospel: Mark 16:1-7 - The Sabbath day being over (Jewish religious reckoning of time is from sunset to sunset) a small group of women disciples go at first light to perform the last rites for their dead leader and so become the first witnesses to his resurrection. That the women should have this witness role must have seemed extraordinary to a male-orientated society. By the time the Gospel came to be written, in the second half of the first century AD, stories in explanation of the Resurrection of the Lord had multiplied. Although today's reading refers to Galilee, there are separate accounts of the meeting of the disciples with the risen Lord. There is no sensible way to reconcile the accounts because each one has to be taken on its own merits as attempts to portray the fundamental truth of the Resurrection.

Sunday 31st March EASTER DAY

First Reading: Acts 10:34,37-43 - This might be described as the first Creed as recounted by an eyewitness. Cornelius is a "God-fearer", a foreigner who respects the Jewish faith. The followers of Jesus were at first doubtful about the possibility of admitting Gentiles into their company – an orthodox Jew would never share food and drink with a pagan. Luke presents us with a dramatic story of how Peter has to learn that the Good News is open to all and sundry.

Second Reading: Colossians 3:1-4 - The new life Paul's converts have received in baptism involves a total re-orientation of their lives. By their baptism (total immersion, the person disappearing under the water, was thought of as symbolic of descent into the grave) they have shared in the death of Jesus, and are now risen, a spiritual rebirth, to new life in Christ (the newly baptised would be dressed in white clothes as a symbol of this newness of life).

Gospel: John 20:1-9 - Mary of Magdala was not a prostitute! John pictures her as being the first to proclaim the fact of the empty tomb. Notice how Peter, as the leader despite his previous denial of Jesus, is given pride of place by the “disciple Jesus loved”. Each of the gospels gives a different account of the Jesus in the Resurrection. Instead of trying to harmonise them we should appreciate the various ways in which the evangelists grapple with the astounding truth.