

OLAS SCRIPTURE COMMENTARIES APRIL 2024 YEAR B

Sunday 7th April - SECOND SUNDAY OF EASTER, DIVINE MERCY

First Reading: Acts 4:32-35 - Luke's second volume (the Gospel was his first) is written with a definite aim: the inexorable spread of the Good News about Jesus Christ. He is describing a new Jewish religious movement in its infancy: the followers of "The Way" go to the Temple and they also meet in each other's houses. Luke provides an idyllic picture of the progress of the Good News in a truly communal society reflecting the reality of the Kingdom of Heaven – no one is in want, no one holds back from providing for the needs of the community. This, Luke is telling us, is the living out of the Good News.

Second Reading: I John 5:1-6 - John's Gospel and the letters ascribed to him come from a community with a very special take on what the sacrifice of Jesus meant and their emphasis is on a love that emanates from God and is intended to radiate in the everyday lives of the believers. The starting point of today's reading is the only begotten Son whose sacrifice has made us children of God. If we love God, our Father then we must necessarily love our brothers and sisters. Our love of God is shown by the way we keep his commands, which are not difficult. Overcoming the world means a rejection of the values that dominate a life without God – the writer was thinking of a personal conquest of corrupt values. "Water and blood" refer back to the gospel's account of Jesus' crucifixion, symbolic of the blood of sacrifice and the water of baptism.

Gospel: John 20:19-31 - The cynical comment, that the wars of the Roman Empire created a desert called peace, has no place in the peace offered by Christ. The Spirit of God imparts a dynamic peace that reaches out to all who will accept it. We should be able to identify so easily with Thomas. I imagine him as a hard-headed realist: seeing, for him, is believing. Perhaps we should link his coming to belief with our own approach to the Eucharist. Our communion – such a familiar word that we often neglect its awesome meaning: in our communion we show our solidarity as members of the Body of Christ on earth.

Monday 8th April THE ANNUNCIATION

First Reading: Isaiah 7:10-14 - This was written at the time when the kingdom of Judah was being threatened on all sides. The King Ahaz is invited to seek a sign of God's continuing protection. For some reason he refuses, which is in itself a sign the king is not faithful to the Lord God. The prophet in return says there will indeed be a sign, the birth of a child who will really be faithful to God. In the Hebrew the word used of the mother-to-be is, "young woman" and the reference is probably to one of the king's wives. When, centuries later the Hebrew text was translated into Greek for the benefit of Jews living throughout the Mediterranean, the word was translated as "virgin". And it was this Greek translation that was familiar to the first Christians.

Second Reading: Hebrews 10:4-10 - The text quoted in the letter is from Psalm 40. The sacrifices of the Old Testament could be (weren't necessarily so) purely ritualistic ceremonies: in other words, as long as the right thing was sacrificed, and the right prayers said nothing else mattered. What God wants is what comes from the heart, readiness to listen and do God's will. The writer says Christ in his humanity is the perfect example of such readiness.

Gospel: Luke 1:26-38 - Luke's account is full of echoes of the Old Testament. Abraham's wife Sarah was told that in her old age she would miraculously bear a son and she didn't believe it possible. another woman prayed for a child to take away the disgrace of her barrenness and her son Samuel was to become the great leader of God's people. The King Ahaz refused to listen to God's prophet Isaiah but Mary's response to the angel is of total acceptance of God's will.

Sunday 14th April THIRD SUNDAY OF EASTER

First Reading: Acts 3:13-15, 17-1 - It is a pity that this reading has been tailored to take it out of its context because a lot of the sense of both this and next week's reading is lost. Peter and John, as pious Jews, were going to pray in the Temple when they met a beggar who asked them for alms. Peter said they didn't have money but in the name of Jesus he commanded the beggar to walk. All who saw this were amazed and today's reading is Peter's response to their expressions of wonder. These are the same people who had demanded the death of Jesus in Pilate's court: they didn't know what they were really doing but God achieved his purpose through them. We are reminded of the words of Jesus at the start of his mission in Galilee – “the Kingdom of God is at hand, repent and believe in the Good News”.

Second Reading: I John 2:1-5 - The “sin” to which the writer refers is the harm caused by division within the community. The remedy is to accept that Jesus is our advocate before God, and he has taken upon himself the penalty for that sin and for all the faults of the world. John says that the person who really knows God is the one who keeps his commands and by doing so allows God's love to completely enter in.

Gospel: Luke 24: 35-48 - Surely a story with Eucharistic overtones? Jesus has to convince the disciples of his reality, in the end by sharing their food. The universal mission announced here was actually to prove a difficulty to the first generation of Christians: The Good News was the fulfilment of Jewish hopes and beliefs; as Jews, surely, they should require their pagan converts to adopt Judaism as the vehicle for their belief in Jesus? We know from the letters of St Paul, written long before the Gospels were produced, that the free admission of pagans into the community of the followers of Jesus was accepted reluctantly.

Sunday 21st April THE FOURTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

First Reading: Acts 4:8-12 -Peter seizes the opportunity of being arraigned before the High Court to proclaim the Good News to the highest in the land. The Jesus they had crucified is the cornerstone to God's plan of salvation and the healed cripple is the witness to the truth of this. We take it for granted our churches are decorated with crucifixes and we may have at least one in our homes. Easy to forget the disgusting reality of such an execution, reserved by the Romans for the lowest of the low. Was it so astonishing that the pillars of Jewish Orthodoxy couldn't take the likes of Peter the Galilean seriously?

Second Reading: I John 3:1-2 - Through baptism we share in the life of Jesus Christ the Son of God and therefore are properly to be called children of God. The “world” – those who don't recognise Jesus for what he is - doesn't recognise us, says the author, who then picks up on the theme of being God's children. We don't know what the future holds out for us but when all is revealed we will be like God himself because we shall see him as he really is - a heady prospect!

Gospel: John 10:11-18 - The gospel imagery of the shepherd is rather difficult for us to digest. The Palestinian shepherd lived with his sheep, knew them by name, defended them from wolves and from robbers (we are reminded of Pope Francis' admonition that the bishops should have the smell of the sheep about them!). Jesus portrays himself as the good shepherd, caring for his flock to the point of dying for them. The sheep are in the first instance, the people of his own tradition, but John's account takes the imagery further, the sheep that are not of his fold are the Gentile people.

Tuesday 23rd April THE FEAST OF ST GEORGE

First Reading Revelation 12: 10-12 - The cosmic battle between Michael and the fallen angels led by Satan has resulted in the triumph of good. The power of evil has been conquered for ever. Satan, in Hebrew thought, was the one who sat in God's court, testing the sincerity of those who professed fidelity to God (have a look at the Book of Job). But Christ's sacrifice has done away with such accusations, enabling his followers to overcome all obstacles, even death itself, so as to enter into the heavenly kingdom.

Second Reading Romans 5:1-5 - Paul's over-riding theme in this letter is that God's gift of faith puts us at peace with Him and the suffering we have to endure become a kind of training school, producing in us a hope that will not be disappointed.

Gospel John 15:18-21 - The key to this passage is that suffering can serve to identify the believer with the sufferings of Christ. *If they did that to me, what do you expect they will do to you?* might be a loose interpretation of Jesus' words. For John the Christ was not of this world, his values were totally opposed to what passes for greatness among mortals and his values are shared by those who share his sufferings.

Sunday 28th April THE FIFTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

First Reading: Acts 9:26-31 - The new convert (still known by his Hebrew name Saul) had to leave the Syrian town of Damascus where he had been sheltered by the believers and came to Jerusalem, where he was known only as a persecutor. He convinced the Jerusalem church but fell out with immigrant Jews who came from the Greek-speaking cities around the Mediterranean and who were probably fiercely traditionalist in their attachment to Jewish customs. (Paul, to use his Roman name: after all he was a proud Roman citizen, was frequently to have difficulties with those who wanted Gentile converts to conform to Jewish practices). In the end he was saved by being sent back to his home town of Tarsus.

Second Reading: I John 3:18-24 - This letter constantly turns around the true meaning of love for the Christian person. Because the Spirit of God brings us alive in the Faith we can be confident that if we are following the truth we have nothing to fear from the God who loves us.

Gospel: John 15:1-8 - Today's reading draws on the imagery found in the "Song of the Vineyard" in chapter 5 of the Book of Isaiah, in which the "beloved" planted and tended a vineyard, prepared everything for the harvest only to find a "harvest" of sour grapes. The Beloved is God, the vineyard is Israel. After all he has done for them, there is only a useless harvest of infidelity. The imagery is used elsewhere in reference to Jesus John's Gospel sees him as the vine itself, the rootstock the source of fruitful life.. Just as the vine branches are encouraged to fruit by being pruned, the disciples have been prepared for their mission by Jesus's teaching. No doubt John sees this "pruning" as the cutting off of would-be followers who have deviated from the true doctrine. We tend to think that disunity among Christians is something comparatively recent, but we need to remember that from the very earliest days there was disagreement about the meaning of Jesus Christ.