

OLAS SCRIPTURE COMMENTARIES MAY 2024

Sunday May 5th THE SIXTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

First Reading: Act 10:25-26, 34-35, 44-48 - The first Christians, all good devout Jews, had difficulty accepting pagan Gentiles into their company - at best they could be tolerated on condition that they adopted the Jewish way of life. In today's reading we get the tail-end of the account of how Peter's eyes were opened through a vision of being commanded to help himself to all sorts of food forbidden to Jews. He then got a message that a Roman military officer - a Gentile but someone they called a God-fearer - begging him to visit. We join the story at the point where, after Peter has laid out the principal points of this new cult, Cornelius and all his household are filled with the presence of the Holy Spirit, sealing if you like, the truth that all and sundry are welcome into the company of Jesus' followers.

Second Reading: I John 4:7-10 - The letters entitled "John" are the product of someone from the same group of disciples who produced the Gospel we call John. This must have been a distinctive group which meditated especially on the love of God for his children. The writer teaches that the loving relationship between God and us isn't initiated by us: love is primarily and originally God's love, demonstrated in the person of Jesus, we have to be like a mirror, reflecting the love that comes from Him.

Gospel: John 15:9-17 - The Gospel homes in on the Great Commandment: "Love one another as I have loved you". Jesus can call his disciples "friends" because he has taught them everything that comes from the Father – they have been "let into the secret". As in the second reading, love is primarily God's love directed toward us – friendship and love being more or less synonymous. And the proof of true friendship is to be found in the fruitful lives of the disciples. The point of reading this today is to remind us that no less than the people of John's time, we too are disciples of Jesus.

Thursday MAY 9th THE ASCENSION OF THE LORD

First Reading: Acts 1:1-11 - It's a mistake to think the Gospels are biographies of Jesus so that: where one Gospel "misses out" a bit, we can supply the information from another Gospel and so on. The book we are reading from today is volume two of Luke's teaching about Jesus. He wants to emphasise that Jesus' work on earth is accomplished, and the task has to be now passed on to his disciples. So, he chooses to picture Jesus spending time with them. Thus, the reference to "forty days," meaning in "the fullness of time." And he isn't going to leave his friends orphans: they will be empowered by the Spirit, but the time has come for them to get on with the job he started. Other New Testament accounts deal with the Risen life of Jesus in quite different ways.

Second Reading: Ephesians 1:17-23 - The notion of a kind of heavenly escalator seems a bit odd but the use of such an image begins to make some sort of sense when we realise that the heavenly court was thought of as a place literally "up there" as opposed to our earthly dwelling "down here" The New Testament writers needed an image of Jesus leaving his disciples to get on with his work and over the centuries dozens of artists have used the image. Thus the Ascension of Jesus marks the perfection of his mission of salvation and makes him ruler of all. The "names" Paul refers to are traditional Jewish names for the hierarchies of angels. The angels are God's messengers but the Christ who sits at the right hand of the Father is far above any angelic powers. And we, who are the Church, continue his earthly presence.

Alternative Reading Ephesians 4:1-13

The writer emphasises the theme of unity: the Christian community can be compared to a living body and within that body there is a variety of functions. Combined efforts of the various gifts build up this body. It is only by working together that we can express our faith and make the community into a true representation of Christ.

Gospel: Mark 16:15-20 - We don't know who added these final five verses to Mark's gospel, but it is generally agreed that they don't form part of the original work which ends with the women fleeing from the tomb in terror after being told that the Lord had gone before them into Galilee where the disciples would meet him. Compare the assurances of wonderworking described in these verses with the other accounts of the Risen Lord in Luke, Matthew, John, and Acts. But the writer gives us the basic message that the disciples were commissioned to go out and spread the Good News.

Sunday May 12th - THE SEVENTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

First Reading: Acts 1:15-17, 20,26 - This passage (which omits the story of Judas' suicide in verses 18-19) relates how the number of the apostles has to be made up. The choice had to be made from men who had been witnesses to all Jesus did up to his Ascension. The number twelve was obviously important, relating to the mission to the whole House of Israel. The final choice by lot represents a traditional way of "leaving it to God".

Second Reading: I John 4:11-16 - God's love has been shown to us in Jesus, and it is that very same love which is shown in the members of the community who are brought to life by the Spirit. As God is Love itself, then God lives in us, we live in God. There is a story told how in the very early days of Christianity a pagan once commented, "See how these Christians love one another." Demonstrations of true caring love between people from perhaps very different backgrounds was clearly the outstanding feature of life for the Followers of Jesus. So, it should be for us too.

Gospel: John 17:11-19 - This passage of John's Gospel is really nothing more than an elaboration of what John wrote in the letter we have just read. Fidelity and joy are the key-note words; fidelity to all the Jesus gave us in the name of the Father, and joy that comes from living in his truth. Worldly values are opposed to those of Jesus: his disciples live **in** the world but are not to be governed **by** the world. Worldly values - self-interest, desire to do better than others, hatred of opposition, obsession with wealth, envy of others - haven't changed much in the past 2000 years and we, as much as the first disciples, have just as hard a task in conforming our values to those of Jesus.

Sunday May 19th PENTECOST

First Reading: Acts 2:1-11 - John's Gospel pictures Jesus bestowing the gift of the Spirit on the disciples on the day of his resurrection. Luke provides yet another and dramatic version of the way the disciples received that gift. The Jewish festival of Shavuot, or Pentecost, fifty days after Passover, commemorates the giving of the Law at Sinai. Luke pictures this as the moment in Jerusalem when the New Law is proclaimed by the disciples. In the story of the Tower of Babel story the people were divided because they could no longer understand each other; now all the listeners, no matter their origins or languages, can understand the Good News that the disciples are "on fire" to impart. The places mentioned in the text probably represent areas where Christian communities had already received the Good News by the time the Acts of the Apostles was written.

Second Reading: Galatians 5:16-25 - Paul's description of what life is like for those who are not led by the Spirit of God sounds depressingly like the catalogue of disastrous behaviour recounted in today's popular press! By contrast, what he says about life with the Spirit might seem impossibly idealistic. Perhaps Paul might say: 'What's wrong with being idealistic?'

Gospel: John 15: 26-27, 16: 12-15 - Although the reading runs smoothly on the page, we have to remember it's been patched together. What John wants to convey is that the disciples of Jesus carry on Jesus' work through the divine power given to them through the gift of God's Spirit. The disciples need to have the confidence that when they proclaim the Good News it's not *their* good news: they are guided by the authority of God's Spirit. By the time John's gospel was put together the Jewish followers of the Jesus way would have been expelled from the synagogues and all, Jewish or Gentile, would have experienced severe problems and persecution in the Roman empire.

Sunday May 26th FEAST OF THE TRINITY

First Reading Deuteronomy 4:32-34, 39-40 - Deuteronomy, the title means "The second giving of the Law", was a reaffirmation of long traditions. Moses is pictured as reminding the Israelites of the wonders of God's saving revelation to them. In consequence, the people must acknowledge Him as the only object of their worship by keeping His commandments. Only in this way will they prosper in the land He has given them.

Second Reading Romans 8: 14-17 - The followers of the Risen Lord have been brought to a completely new way of life through the Spirit which is why they are able to call God "Abba", the name a child uses to its father, and so they can call Christ their brother. Their sufferings make them sharers in the sufferings of their siblings in the faith and, as Jesus was raised to glory by the Father, so they can expect to share in that glory. We have here the beginnings of a process by which the Christians came to understand that within the divine nature of the one Godhead there were three distinct elements, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Gospel Matthew 28:16-20 - For the Gospels of both Mark and Matthew the return to the beginnings in Galilee is the setting for the Resurrection encounter with Jesus but Matthew's version given here has been crafted in the light of the experience of living and teaching the Good News for many years: there is no hesitation about the admission of Gentiles and we also have a particular baptismal formula, the only place in the New Testament where it appears (in other New Testament texts where baptism is mentioned it is referred to as "baptism in the name of Jesus"). The passage indicates that by the time of writing the expectant hope of the first generation about the imminent Second Coming of Christ, has been replaced by the assurance that the Lord will be "with them" to the end of time, however long that "time" shall last..