

SCRIPTURE COMMENTARIES JUNE 2024

Sunday June 2nd CORPUS CHRISTI, THE FEAST OF THE BODY AND BLOOD OF CHRIST

First Reading Exodus 24:3-8 - To our ears this description of how the Israelites cemented their relationship with God seems strange to say the least. But the writer could only do so in a way that was familiar to him. So, he uses the style of treaty signing that the people of the time understood. The Covenant between God and his people is told in terms of used of treaties made between kings and their vassals. The poured-out lifeblood of the sacrificial victims is witness to the oaths of fidelity on both sides and the sprinkling of the blood over the people signifies their commitment (we might be reminded of the words of the crowd at the trial of Jesus: his blood be upon us.).

Second Reading Hebrews 9:11-15 Writing to Jewish converts formerly associated with the Jerusalem Temple, the author uses the language of the Temple ritual to help explain his understanding of Christ's work of redemption. Forget notions of a Christian church building: the Temple was based on a series of courtyards, the innermost one containing the room known as the Holy of Holies. Once a year on the Day of Atonement the High Priest entered that sacred place symbolising God's presence among his people to offer sacrifice in expiation of the people's sins. Christ, the author says, has become the perfect high priest offering a once-for-all sacrifice. Another Temple ritual, sprinkling the ashes of a burnt offering, was symbolic of cleansing people who had been defiled through contact with corpses or because of disease. Christ's sacrifice brings about a fundamental "cleansing" of our whole selves. Christ himself has become the sign of the new covenant.

Gospel Mark 14:12-16, 22-26 The Synoptic gospels (Mark, Matthew, and Luke) portray the Last Supper in terms of the Jewish Passover Meal celebrated yearly in memory of the escape from slavery in Egypt and the covenant then made between God and his people. The disciples (we shouldn't think of twelve apostles, there must have been quite a crowd of men and women) are the "family" of Jesus and follow with him the ritual of the meal. But the shared bread and wine is given a new significance as the "new" Passover celebration celebrating the new life of the Kingdom inaugurated by Christ's sacrifice.

Sunday June 9th Tenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

First Reading Genesis 3:9-15 All traditional societies have stories about the beginnings of things. How to explain the human condition, was a question tackled by the civilizations of the Middle East in various ways, a common thread being the first humans falling from the gods' favour. The Genesis story follows a similar pattern. Innocence is typified by nakedness and the fall from favour is represented as a sort of rebellion against God, the source of all wisdom and knowledge. The "penalties" are the different hardships of existence for the man and the woman. The snake is seen as a source of evil, which explains why the woman's descendants are at war with it. Cultivating the fields was largely women's work and they must have known the dangers of disturbing a viper in the fields. Christian allegorical interpretation has made this a prophecy relating to Mary and Jesus.

Second Reading II Corinthians 4:13-5:1 Paul reminds his readers of the promise held out to all the followers of the Lord Jesus to be transformed by God, raised like Jesus to new life. This present life, "the outer man" with its hardships is contrasted with the "inner man" destined for eternal glory. Perhaps Paul, consciously or unconsciously is influenced by the Greek philosophy of Plato who saw the visible world as pale reflections of an invisible reality. Paul was by profession a tentmaker, which might explain his analogy of this life as being like a tent which is folded away when no longer needed.

Gospel Mark 3:20-35 Mark's gospel is one of conflict, the battle between the forces of evil and the goodness of Jesus. The enmity against Jesus comes from "good" people – the scribes were the religious experts, the theologians and Canon Lawyers and Liturgists of their day – who saw this "heretic" as a danger to the proper conduct of religious life. Their opposition was in fact, Mark says, an opposition to the working of God's Spirit, the ultimate rebellion against God. Why the author of this gospel wrote in this way might be explained by the fact that the "Jesus Movement" was, in the beginning seen as another Jewish movement: Jewish followers of the movement went to synagogue, went to the Temple in Jerusalem. By the time Mark was writing the mood had changed, followers of Jesus were no longer welcomed by the adherents to the "traditional" orthodox Jewish traditions.

Sunday June 16th Eleventh Sunday in Ordinary Time

First Reading Ezekiel 17:22-24 The Middle East has been a centre of conflict seemingly for ever as powers from the north, the east and the south battled out for who was to be top dog. In 598 BC the Babylonians defeated the Kingdom of Judah, took the king and about 8000 citizens into exile in Babylon, leaving behind an unworthy uncle as Regent. The prophet Ezekiel looks forward to a future king who will be worthy of the title. The "shoot" is that longed for king, the high mountain is Jerusalem, and the sheltering birds are the people of the nation, while the other trees are the kings of the surrounding countries. When this great king comes the world will recognise the power of God.

Second Reading II Corinthians 5:6-10 The translation of the first sentence in this passage obscures the fact that Paul is quoting a saying that some of the Christians in Corinth must have been fond of, to the effect that being alive in this world cuts one off from Christ. He then goes on to turn the saying round: alive or dead, all that is important is being pleasing to Christ. He pictures Christ being our judge who will evaluate our true worth.

Gospel Mark 4: 26-34 Here are two parables taken from a chapter of parables about the Kingdom of God. The seed corn grows to produce a harvest, the tiny mustard seed grows into a huge bush. The Kingdom grows from tiny beginnings (with a handful of Galilean peasants), its growth is unnoticed by the great of the nation. As the seed corn produces a rich harvest and the mustard seed grows into a bush that can give shelter, so will the Kingdom grow, to produce good people and to offer shelter to those who look for assurance. This view is in contrast to the Kingdom being "heavenly". The Kingdom is in the here and now, as is borne out by all those who work for the good of others.

Sunday 23rd June Twelfth Sunday in Ordinary Time

First Reading Job 38:8-11 In the Genesis story God creates order from chaos. To the ancients of the Mediterranean the sea typified just that chaos, as did the violent destructive storms that can spring up in the sea: both sea and storm seemed subject to no law. The words of today's reading are put in the mouth of one Elihu, at the end of a long poetic section in which Elihu answers Job's ranting against God. God is master of even the uncontrollable elements, bringing order to everything.

Second Reading II Corinthians 5:14-17 There is nothing in the New Testament to suggest that Paul had ever met Jesus "in the flesh" so perhaps his comment refers to those who had known him. His point however is that the believer is joined to Jesus' death by being turned away from worldly matters – by which he means a life that has no place for God – and thus comes into a new creation – a new sort of life which takes its inspiration from the Risen Christ. Taken in the wrong way this could lead to the notion "thank God I am not the rest of people". which is not Paul's idea at all. He only wanted the best out of people whatever their background.

Gospel Mark 4: 35-41 This passage is a vivid realisation of the understanding about God that was expressed in the first reading. If the raging storm is calmed at Jesus' command, then his authority is from God. Remember that Mark was writing for persecuted Christians in Rome: the raging sea represents the turmoil they are in adrift and threatened by outside forces over which they had no control. The reassurance of the story is that the Risen Christ will never abandon them.

Sunday June 30th Feast of Saints Peter and Paul

NOTE: Christian belief regards Peter and Paul as co-missionaries for the Church: Peter's work was primarily directed to the people of his Jewish faith while Paul dared to open the way of salvation to the pagans.

First Reading Acts 12:1-11

There is mounting hostility to the Jesus Movement. In the manner of a good adventure story the rescue of Peter balances Luke's account of Paul's first missionary journey and his return with Barnabas to Jerusalem, highlighting the importance of Peter to the early Church. The story is presented in great detail the squads of guards, the chains, the locked gates. It is all so impossibly beyond human expectation that Peter thinks at first, he must be dreaming. It is a pity that today's reading omits the very human detail about the maid who hears Peter hammering at the door and it so excited that all she can do is to run the gathered community with the news, forgetting to unlock the door!

Second Reading 2 Timothy 4:6-8,17-18

This letter is one of a collection which are thought to be by a disciple of Paul, borrowing his name to add authority to his writing. Paul is described here as drawing to the end of his life in the knowledge that he has remained faithful through the power of the Lord, using the familiar image of life being like a race, though in this contest there are more than one winner, the prize going to all who have longed for Christ's Appearing. The author of this letter, following in the tradition of Paul's own teaching but writing at a time when the communities established by him are rather more structured, is concerned with the dangers posed by false teachers, who are preaching a different gospel than the one announced by Paul.

Gospel Matthew 16:13-19

Peter's response to the question Jesus puts to his own followers recognises Jesus as "Son of the living God", thereby removing the title "Messiah" from the political concept of "King". Jesus follows this with the solemn address, "Simon, son of Jonah", giving him a unique position of authority. "Binding and loosing" are rabbinical terms to do with admission to or expulsion from the community. In Jewish tradition the palace official who was entrusted with the keys had enormous power, controlling who came in and who was let out. Peter is given similar authority over the gathering of God's people.