

OLAS SCRIPTURE COMMENTARIES AUGUST 2024

Sunday 4th EIGHTEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

First Reading Exodus 16:2-4; 12-15 - A familiar story of the Israelites' journey through the wilderness, their constant carping about their situation. They contrast the tough conditions in the desert with the life they have left behind: they may have been slaves in Egypt, but they had food to eat to their hearts' content. It is a very human story. We really have no idea what the "manna" might have been but it's not the detail of the story that counts, rather it's the broad message that God never fails to care for his people. We understand the reason for the inclusion of this reading when we come to the Gospel and the discussion of a different kind of bread from heaven.

Second Reading Ephesians 4:17, 20-24 - The author, who has borrowed Paul's name to give authority to his teaching, reminds his readers that their life in Christ is something totally new, totally divorced from what they might have experienced before. There is always the temptation to fall back into old ways, but if that happens, they shouldn't despair but make a fresh start. This is a realistic approach to what must have been a fairly common experience as the first flush of enthusiasm waned and the expectation of the imminent return of Christ in Glory faded into the future.

Gospel John 6:24-35 - The Gospels were not written as biographical works but as the writer's teaching about Jesus' mission each writer, if you like, seeing him from a slightly different angle. The Fourth Gospel portrays Jesus it portrays in a very different figure than any of the three Synoptic Gospels. He is given to long discourses in which he reveals his unique relationship with The Father. This Sunday's reading from Chapter Six and for the next three Sundays illustrate this style very clearly. It follows on from the miraculous feeding of the five thousand and the people's clamour for more. "Bread" can be either literally, food to eat, or a metaphor for teaching - "food for the mind". At this stage in the discourse, bread appears to have this meaning. Jesus is the teacher, who can lead them into the way of truth. In this sense he is the "bread of life". If they listen to his words, they will never lack for what is necessary to do God's will.

Sunday 11th - NINETEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

First Reading I Kings 19:4-8 - Jezebel, wife of Ahab king of Judah, was from Tyre (in modern Lebanon) a foreigner who had brought with her the worship of her god Ba'al, much to the distress and anger of the prophet Elijah who, after battling with Queen's Ba'al worshipping priests had to go on the run. He's totally disillusioned: he's done God's work only to be rewarded by persecution. Now, in the desert, he is on his last legs. But the Lord does not desert him, providing him with nourishment that will last him until he reaches the mountain of God. We can recognise "Forty" as a recurrent biblical theme: forty years in the Sinai wilderness, forty days in the desert. The way the number is used really means "a lot" and can also the sense of "completeness" in some activity "in the fullness of time."

Second Reading Ephesians 4:30 - 5:2 - The author continues his admonition to his readers: that their lives should not betray the gift of God's Spirit they have received in their baptism. Clearly, the relationships between the members of the community is not all that it might be: quarrels and verbal abuse should have no place in the lives of people who have been redeemed by Christ's sacrifice. By being made one with Christ, whose sacrifice was made on their behalf, they have become God's children, and they should show one another the love God has shown to them. This teaching seems especially important these days when so much vitriol is written in social media by people claiming to be Christian.

Gospel John 6: 41-51 - We continue reading from Chapter Six. At this point the discourse takes a fresh turn: Jesus' sacrifice is nourishment for the redemption of mankind. With an echo of the criticism made by the people of Nazareth, Jesus' critics protest against this preacher who had grown up among them: how can he presume to claim to be their teacher? Their ancestors were kept alive by the manna given by God in the desert, food for the day, but the nourishment he provides opens to eternal life.

John's gospel is accused of being anti-Semitic, but the word translated here as "Jews" can mean the people of Judea, who considered themselves the top-notch interpreters of the Law and who took exception to this upstart preacher from backward Galilee.

Thursday 15th -THE ASSUMPTION OF THE BLESSED VIRGIN MARY INTO HEAVEN

First Reading Apocalypse 11:19; 12:1-6,10 - It is hard for us to understand the extravagant "coded" language of the Apocalypse, but the author is painting a picture of the end of all things, with signs and portents that

lead up to the final triumph of the Lord Jesus Christ. The description of the woman, the stars, the sun and moon, is drawn from the portrayal of Middle Eastern female deities and it is difficult to determine how John meant for her to be interpreted: perhaps as the heavenly Israel, struggling against all the powers arrayed against her until she gives birth to the Messiah. But the Roman Catholic traditional interpretation has been, quite understandably, seen her as figurative of Mary.

Second Reading I Corinthians 15:20-26 - The merits of Mary stem entirely from her acceptance of her role as Mother of the Messiah and so she has been seen as the first in receiving the fullness of the salvation her Son brought to the world. It is this fullness that Paul is writing about in today's reading. In celebrating today's feast, the Church is saying that where Mary is now, so we shall be.

Gospel Luke 1:39-56 - This beautiful hymn of praise and thanksgiving to God, that Luke puts into the mouth of Mary, draws on the centuries-old traditions of Jewish religious thinking and provides a foretaste of the Beatitudes. Mary is the ideal "Israel" who keeps faith with God and longs for the fulfilment of his promises to his Chosen People, she is the image of the Church, the community of the follower of Jesus, who seek to bring him to knowledge of the world.

Sunday 18th - TWENTIETH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

First Reading Proverbs 9:1-6 - Wisdom is portrayed as a feminine personification of the divine creative power. Today's passage is the first section of a dramatic competition between Wisdom and Folly, each trying to outdo the other in attracting the ignorant. Wisdom's house ("the seven pillars") is open to them, the feast is prepared – the feast is symbolic of the knowledge for life that Wisdom can impart. And "Wisdom" is a foreshadowing of the later understanding of the Holy Spirit.

Second Reading Ephesians 5:15-20 - The author is concerned that the lives of all the members should reflect the gifts of God's Spirit. Their neighbours may be people whose values are egotistical and materialistic, but they themselves must have their sights set on higher things. The reference to the dangers of drink may be practical advice but intoxication might be a metaphor for leading a dissolute life. The spirit of the community celebration, the uplifting words they sing together should carry them through into daily life which then becomes a continual hymn of praise to God.

Gospel John 6:51-58 - The discourse now turns to the person of Jesus himself being food for life. His hearers are scandalised, understandably interpreting his words as an invitation to cannibalism. This part of the discourse is the only specifically Eucharistic reference in John's gospel. The "bread" the Israelites ate in the wilderness was no more than daily nourishment but the "bread" that is the person of Christ brings the recipient into a relationship with the eternal Father.

Sunday 24th - TWENTY FIRST SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

First Reading Joshua 24:1-2, 15-18 - This is the make or break moment in the epic tale of the entry of the Israelites into the Promised Land. It's time to make a definitive decision: to serve the Lord God or turn back to the deities they worshipped in Egypt (or even accept the gods worshipped by their near neighbours). The question reinforces the continual need, throughout the history of Israel, for an affirmation of the Saviour God. We know from the evidence of archaeology that, whatever the official worship was, at least some of the people did in fact reverence the local deities of the land.

Second Reading Ephesians 5:21-32 - I don't think the author was really concerned with giving divinely inspired instruction for marital relationships (at least I hope he wasn't)! He's using the example of marriage as it was understood in his time in his attempt to explain how he sees the relationship between Christ and the Christian Community. By the sacrifice of his life, death and resurrection, Christ is made one with the community of the believers. Note that the word translated here as Church ("ekklesia" in Greek), means "community" rather than the hierarchical structure that we think of as "Church" today.

Gospel John 6:60-69 - John's discourse concludes with a warning that it is the "spirit" that gives life, not the "flesh". A favourite device of John's gospel: "flesh" represents the earthly, obvious sense of human activity, whereas "spirit" refers to God-inspired life. The passage seems to accept some form of predestination – only those can believe who are accepted by the Father – but we shouldn't read too much into this, John's intention being to stress that belief is something initiated by God. Like the Israelites of old, Jesus' disciples are being given a choice and it is their leader who replies on their behalf.