

## OLAS SCRIPTURE COMMENTARIES SEPTEMBER 2024 YEAR B

September 1st **TWENTY SECOND SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME**

**First Reading Deuteronomy 4:1-2, 6-8** - The Book of Deuteronomy ("The Second Giving of the Law") actually dates from long after the time of Moses whose name is used to give authority to the laws and traditions that had emerged over the centuries from the Israelites' beginnings in the Wilderness experience. To us "Law" means decisions made and possibly repealed by Parliament, the whole system that governs our lives as a community, The Law referred to in this Book consists of the dictates imagined as laid down by God, edicts that ensure a person's life conforms to what God wants of his Chosen People. From our viewpoint it's worth remembering that Jesus summed up the whole purpose of this Law as "Love God with your whole heart and love your neighbour as much as you love yourself." By observance of the Law, the Jewish nation was to stand out as different from all their neighbours. The faithful Jewish person was to wear the Law close to his heart, the proof that he recognised the Lord as his Saviour God. As a literal reminder of this, Orthodox Jewish men at prayer wear *tefillin* – small boxes containing biblical verses - fastened to the arm and forehead.

**Second Reading James 1:17-18, 21-22, 27** - Maybe some of the first Christian generation thought that "faith" was all that was required to be acceptable to God. James counteracts this by asserting that faith is a gracious gift which enables us to *live a whole healthy life*. God's creative word has been implanted in us, to be lived out, not just heard. The importance of care for widows and orphans is a strong echo of the ideals of Judaic traditions which inspired the whole letter. The writer's insistence on *living one's* faith gives us some insight into the dangerous feverish spirit that filled some of the earliest believers - the Lord was returning in glory any day now so all that matters is to believe! What James was reminding his reader in no uncertain terms that their ancient insistence on *living a life* was essential

Gospel Mark 7:1-8, 14-1, 21-23 - It's easy to understand that if the Law is all important some people are going to continually try to lay down rules for how it is to be applied in everyday life. We need to distinguish between what is essential and what is a matter of choice or of secondary importance. Over centuries Hebrew scholars delved into minute interpretations of every aspect of the Law. Hundreds of directives and prohibitions had grown up to satisfy people's natural enquiries about how life should conform to the authority of the Jewish Law. Such obsession for strict rules and blind conformism is here roundly condemned by Jesus. It's a case of not seeing the wood because so many trees are in the way. Is there a lesson here for our own way of life as Christians?

September 8th **TWENTY THIRD SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME B**

**First Reading Isaiah 35:4-7** - The Promised Land had become divided into two kingdoms: Israel in the North, Judah in the south. At the time this text was produced, seven hundred years before the birth of Jesus, Israel had combined with its northern neighbour Syria and had invaded Judah in an attempt to get that kingdom to ally with them against the dominant Assyrian Empire. It all sounds horribly similar to the violent warfare in the eastern Mediterranean of today. The outcome was disaster: Israel was occupied, and Judah became a vassal state of the Empire. Against this background, Isaiah issues prophecies of ultimate doom for the conquerors and looks forward to the eventual release from bondage of Judah and Jerusalem. When that time comes, the land of the conquerors shall be turned into wilderness, but a deserted Judah shall blossom, both land and people shall be renewed – the blind shall see, the lame walk, the dumb speak. We might take this as wishful thinking: neither Israel nor Judah ever regained prestige. However, later generations chose to interpret Isaiah's words as prophetic of a future Messiah.

**Second Reading James 2:1-5** - We are still listening to excerpts from James' hard-hitting letter. He has a salutary story about the evil of making class distinction on the basis of appearance. It's all too easy to fall into the same trap ourselves, clergy and laity. In the Christian community there should be no such worldly judgements of worth, says this letter writer.

**Gospel Mark 7:31-37** - Jesus returns from a tour of predominantly Gentile districts north of Israel (Tyre and Sidon are cities in what is now Lebanon) Mark introduced this element by way of showing that Gentile converts were welcome in the community of the believers. The man the people bring to be healed is described as being deaf and having a speech impediment and unusually the healing is accomplished not by a mere word of command - "be healed" - but an elaborate procedure - touching the deaf ears and losing the tongue with spittle The process is accompanied by intense emotion (rather lamely translated as "with a sigh"). Mark's mention of the onlookers' reaction is making a deliberate connection with the words of Isaiah which we have just listened to: Jesus' mission is e to proclaim the dawn of a fundamental renewal that extends beyond the confines of Judaism. The Gospel accounts aren't to revoke a reaction of "Gosh how wonderful!" They are intended to point to the wholeness of being that can come from an acceptance of Christ as our Saviour.

September 15th **TWENTY FOURTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME**

**First Reading: Isaiah 50:5-9** - Last week's reading was against the background of the threat of war in the Middle East. The later chapters of the book of Isaiah, by a different hand, are set 150 years later. Now the great power is the Babylonian empire, Jerusalem has been destroyed and the leading citizens deported to Babylon. Set within these chapters are four poems known as the Songs of the Servant. What about the identity of the "Servant"? Traditional Judaism sees them as referring to the nation of Israel suffering under foreign domination or the remnant of the nation but still people who have remained faithful to God. In this passage the speaker is aware of his absolute need to speak in God's name, no matter who opposes him. Christians have chosen to take the Songs as pointing in a special way to the person of Jesus, the Messiah, and it is easy see today's reading as a useful vehicle for portraying the innocent suffering Jesus whom God will vindicate. Or, perhaps, reflecting how we might stand up for our faith in Jesus.

**Second Reading: James 2: 14-18** - Was the notion that only faith mattered, behaviour was no longer important and hysterical reaction to the announcement of God's promise of heavenly joy? The whole of James' letter is a corrective of such misguided euphoria and today's reading is a pithy little story to illustrate the point that still has perfect resonance today. Yes, faith is God's gift, but it has to be used. What's the use of claiming to believe if your belief doesn't shape the way live your life?

**Gospel: Mark 8:27-35** - To use modern day language, Mark was a salesman for Jesus. His Gospel is sometimes called the gospel of the Secret – the secret of Jesus' true identity and Mark uses a variety of techniques to keep his audience in suspense. The evil spirits are ordered to be silent, people who are healed of their illnesses are told to keep quiet about it, and now the disciples are told the keep to themselves the truth blurted out by Peter. This is the turning point in the gospel. Now the "blind" disciples have had their inner eyes opened, now Jesus' mission is revealed to be truly dangerous. "Messiah" means "king" and there were plenty of people for whom such a title was a threat. Jesus begins to teach his followers that this "king" was of a totally different kind to any that the people expected.

September 22nd **TWENTY FIFTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME**

**First Reading: Wisdom 2:12, 17.20** - This book was written in Greek, probably in Alexandria in Egypt, a couple of centuries before the time of Jesus. It is not part of the Hebrew Bible. Attacking the materialist philosophy of the irreligious, the author draws on one of the Servant Songs from Isaiah (Isaiah 52:13 – 53:12) to paint a word picture of the kind of sneering attitude of the godless in the face of the virtuous person, who can properly be called a child of God.

**Second Reading: James 3:16 – 4:3** - All was not sweetness and light in the communities of the first generation of Christians: living up to the lofty ideals of the Faith has always presented problems. James puts down the lack of forbearance, consideration and compassion to a wrong understanding of prayer. Our prayer should be directed towards changing us, not changing God. Someone once used a simple illustration of this by imagining a farmer praying it will rain to water the growing field of wheat while a teacher leads her to pray for sunshine on their picnic. Both farmer and teacher should be praying for the courage to do the best with whatever comes.

**Gospel: Mark 9:30-37** - Today's reading follows on from the episode we know as the "Transfiguration" where Mark pictures the mountain top vision of Jesus in glory. The Expression "Son of Man" is enigmatic.

Geza Vermes, a renowned Hebrew scholar, has suggested it's a typical Galilean roundabout way of saying "I." Jesus of course was from Galilee, a country rustic in the eyes of sophisticated people in Judea. The disciples have had a brief revelation of Jesus in glory, but the ensuing argument shows that the disciples still don't really understand him. They have dreams of Jesus announcing a revived Jewish kingdom with all its trappings of glory, so talk of doom and death don't make any sense. The disciples consider themselves to be the inner circle, the "cabinet" of Jesus' company but he gives them an object lesson by hugging a child to himself. The inhabitants of the Kingdom have to model themselves on the simplicity and trust that characterise the quality of the child. Notice a youngster trotting along confidently beside her parent and you'll get an idea of what he was getting at. The real secret of Christianity isn't about dressing up in grand clothes and elaborate ceremonies: it's the simple stubborn belief that helps us hold life together.

September 29th **TWENTY SIXTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME**

**First Reading: Numbers 11:25-29** - A bit of an odd name for a religious book. The Hebrew title is "In the Desert", a better description for a document that makes use of the Israelite experience in the desert of Sinai. The title "Numbers" was given to the book when it was translated from Hebrew into Greek some centuries before Christ and refers to the account of the census of the tribes described in a couple of chapters later in the book. The story in today's passage refers to God's presence in the *shekinah*, the Cloud that both indicates and conceals his presence from mortal eyes. An interesting detail is in the number of the "elders" - 72 in all – that reminds us of the disciples being sent out by Jesus to preach the Good News of the Kingdom. The point of the story of Eldad and Medad, as far as we are concerned, is that God's spirit that moved the elders to prophecy is free to move where it wills. I'm sorry if that's a long-winded way of explaining how the first reading relates to today's Gospel, where Mark uses the story to exactly the same purpose.

**Second Reading: James 5:1-6** - We are still reading passages from James' letter! Today's selection reads like a prophetic condemnation out of the Old Testament. James is attacking the values of the society among whom the Christians live. All the accoutrements of wealth are ultimately worthless. As my Aunt Kathleen used to remind me, there are no pockets in shrouds. James shows the traditional biblical importance of justice for the poor – here designated as the agricultural labouring classes – which is just as valid today as it was in his day.

**Gospel: Mark 9:38-43, 45, 47-48** - Biblical scholars believe Mark was writing his gospel for a mixed Jewish and Gentile community in Rome that was under threat of violent persecution and needed encouragement. Jesus' reply to those who complain about the healing done by "outsiders" is, basically, if you aren't against us, then you must be for us.

The least action of good will shall not go without its reward. The corollary is that anyone whose actions work against the faith of the community is worthy of condemnation.