

OLAS SCRIPTURE COMMENTARIES DECEMBER 2024 YEAR C

We shall be following Luke's Gospel this liturgical year. This Gospel is the first volume of a whole treatise (the second volume is The Acts of the Apostles) on the origins and development of the Christian movement. The author was most likely a Gentile follower of Judaism, well-educated and at home with both the Jewish and the Gentile world. He based the framework of his Gospel on Mark with the addition of two introductory chapters relating to the birth and childhood of Jesus (largely quite different than the account provided by Matthew). He also used some material he shared with Matthew as well as other material unique to himself. Luke was writing to show how the mission of Jesus, originally targeted at Jews, could appeal to a wider world as well. He was especially interested in how the Christian message had importance for the poor and disadvantaged in society.

Advent is a time of preparation for our celebration of the coming of our Saviour into the world. In the Orthodox Churches it is a time of fasting similar to the Lenten penitential practices. I suppose you could say that fasting - giving up the indulgences we permit ourselves during the year - is like the physical training of an athlete preparing for a great event. And the readings at Mass during Advent are all about preparation: the birth of this baby was the birth of a whole new way of looking at ourselves and our world. In view of all the problems we personally have to face and the horrors of power-mad world leaders it's easy to despair but the event we are preparing for is a reminder that it's better to light a candle than to curse the darkness.

Sunday 1st December FIRST SUNDAY IN ADVENT

First Reading: Jeremiah 33:14-16 - Jeremiah would recognise the fearful carnage in today's Holy Land: he lived through the ruin of the two Jewish Kingdoms of Israel and Judah, the destruction of the Temple - a source of especial grief to this member of a priestly family - and the carrying off into exile of many of the people. He was reviled for what his enemies regarded as defeatist prophecies, was imprisoned, and fled to Egypt where he probably died. He saw the nation's defeat as the consequence of the leadership's lack of fidelity to God but looked forward to a new worthy king in the line of David. The kingdoms of Israel and Judah, separated since the time of Solomon's son would be restored under a new covenant between God and His people. In the event these hopes were not fulfilled but they helped give birth to the expectation of eventual coming of a national hero - a saviour who would restore the fortunes of the people.

Second Reading: 1 Thessalonians 3:12 - 4:2 - This is reckoned to be the earliest of Paul's extant letters and it's full of enthusiasm for his new converts. His disciple Timothy had brought him news of their fidelity and love for one another and for God, for which the apostle gives thanks and prays that God will reward their faithfulness by bringing them to even greater love in preparation for the coming Day of the Lord. We should remember that at this early stage of Christianity it was anticipated that the triumphant Return of Christ in judgement would take place in the lifetime of the believers. Note that today's reading from Luke's Gospel is based on just such an assumption.

Gospel: Luke 21:25-28, 34-36 - Couched in Apocalyptic language, this passage of Luke's gospel is a forbidding introduction to the Advent season. This kind of scriptural language has always been popular with those who read signs and portents in current events, but there never has been a time when the "signs" portrayed here have not been manifest somewhere in the world. The vital message, however, is not to interpret this or that event as literally indicative of the imminent Second Coming but to conduct our lives, as Paul reminds the Thessalonians. with faith and love.

Sunday 8th December Second Sunday in Advent

First Reading. Baruch 5: 1-9 The historical Baruch was a disciple of Jeremiah. Nothing is known about the writer who in the second century BC borrowed his name (quite an acceptable practice in those days) and something of Jeremiah's style (see last week's first reading). The Babylonian exile five hundred years earlier had become a model for what Jews scattered throughout the ancient Mediterranean world, the so-called Diaspora, were experiencing. Sometimes their religious

enthusiasm for "the old country" outdid that of the people "back home" (not dissimilar to the ardent patriotism sometimes shown by immigrants to the UK, North America and Australia for their respective mother countries). As in many Old Testament writings, Jerusalem is personified as representing the whole Jewish nation. The time has come, the writer declares, for Jerusalem to put off her mourning and arise to welcome her children from the four corners of the world. For us Advent is a preparation for the coming of the One who welcomes us all into the heavenly Jerusalem. Or does he? Is God's kingdom here or in an afterlife? We can make that kingdom live by the way we treat each other in the here and now.

Second Reading Philippians 1:3-6, 8-11 - Philippi, in Macedonia, northern Greece, was evangelised by Paul on his second missionary journey and he seems to have had a special affection for the people who formed the Christian community in the city. He gives thanks to God for the work of his converts in spreading the Good News and encourages them to deepen their commitment to each other by way of preparing for the coming of the Day of Christ. Paul's religious passion was based on his understanding that the Christ was in fact the fulfilment of everything the Jewish religion stood for but his break with traditional Jewish Orthodoxy was caused by his alarming belief that the message of people like Baruch (see today's first reading) could be taken literally. Orthodox Jews expected, hoped, the time would come when the pagans would recognize the superiority of their God but that didn't include the Gentile world as being on equal terms with the People of the Covenant.

Gospel: Luke 3:1-6 - Last Sunday's apocalyptic language is replaced by a text that picks up the message of the first reading. This time the words of the prophet Isaiah are used by the writer as finding a glorious fulfilment in the person of Jesus. Note how precisely Luke fixes the moment of the Baptist's preaching against the backdrop of the wider world, as if to remind the reader that the coming of Jesus has universal effect. We know from other sources that the Baptist had a large following and long after his death his disciples were still preaching his message to people in the Jewish Diaspora

Monday 9th December The Feast of the Immaculate Conception

First Reading Genesis 3:9-15, 20 - Throughout the world there are dramatic poetic stories about the beginnings of the human race and the understanding of the human condition. So too with the biblical account. Why is there evil and hardship in the world? The answer given by this story is simply that humans are not faithful to what God wants of them: we are all, as it were, Adam and Eve, all sharing in this common condition. The feast we celebrate today points to Mary as the one representative of the human race who reverses this defect, full of grace from the first instance of her existence.

Second Reading Ephesians 1:3-6, 11-12 - The essential message of this reading from Paul's letter to the people of Ephesus (in modern day Turkey) is the understanding that in Jesus Christ we believers have all been made children of God. Paul's way of expressing this shouldn't be used to preach a message of predestination as though we are a chosen few and the rest all damned. What he is saying is that the plan of salvation through Jesus Christ is God's intention from all eternity. Our feast today expresses our understanding of Mary's part in this eternal plan.

Gospel: Luke 1:26-38 - The tradition that Mary from the moment of her conception was free from the imperfection of common humanity springs from Luke's account of the angelic visitation. The titles her son is to bear are drawn from the prophetic writings of Judaism as Mary's modest acceptance of her role in our salvation. Devotion to the significant part Mary played in the work of redemption grew quite early on in Christian thinking and gradually evolved more and more imaginative details to heighten her importance.

Sunday 14th December Third Sunday in Advent

First Reading Zephaniah 3:14-18 - This passage from another seventh century BC prophet continues the theme of the glorious restoration of the people of Israel. Jerusalem is seen as the focus of this triumph and the passage ends with an extraordinary image of God himself dancing and singing with joy, reminding us how King David danced before the Ark of the Covenant (2 Samuel 6:16) and even of scenes in the film *Fiddler on the Roof*. Orthodox Jews still dance with the sacred Rolls of the Torah which represent the Word of God. The exuberance of religious celebration, so much a part and parcel of

Jewish tradition is something we western Christians seem to have lost. Exuberance seems lacking in our worship, even shaking hands at Mass is often thought of as "a bit over the top" by some people.

Second Reading Philippians 4:4-7 - Towards the end of his letter to his friends in Philippi Paul stresses the importance of happiness in the service of the Lord, confidence that God will provide what we need and ask for in prayer, and tolerance one for another. Tolerance should be the mark of the Christian: too often it has been just the opposite – a rigid conformity and persecution of those who differ has sadly marked our relationships with others, and duty rather than happiness has been the standard set for us. In my childhood, admittedly more than seventy-five years ago, religious satisfaction was measured primarily by *does* and *don'ts*, as illustrated by someone who thought they had to confess having missed Sunday Mass because they had a broken leg. However, Paul insists that happiness, tolerance and prayer are the qualities that will bring the inner peace and tranquillity that should be the mark of the Christian.

Gospel: Luke 3:10-18 - The Baptist's advice to the varied characters who flock to him is striking. He is no rabid demagogue, no airy mystic. And note the down-to-earth instruction to the soldiers – not an exhortation to give up their way of life but to live it honourably. And the purpose of it all? To prepare for the coming of the one who is to bring in the Day of Judgment. Few of us have ever seen a winnowing fan but for a moment try to imagine the ears of wheat that have been threshed and broken from their stalks and husks, being picked up in shallow baskets and tossed in the air, to let the breeze carry away the light chaff and allow the good heavy grain fall back into the basket to be treasured. The Gospel is in effect challenging us whether we are lightweight in our faith.

Sunday 22nd December Fourth Sunday in Advent

First Reading Micah 5:1-4

Living at the end of the eighth century BC, Micah was a country man, not given to sophisticated language, suspicious of the city dwellers whose behaviour he thought of as being the root of the coming national disaster: usurers, swindling tradesmen, corrupt clergy and judges. But amidst all this, there is hope: he develops the idea of the "Remnant", the faithful few who will be obedient to God's demands. Jesus will use similar language when he talks about his "little flock". Micah looks forward to the birth of a shepherd king of the line of David, whose birthplace was Bethlehem (*House of Bread*) and who will restore the people of Israel, bringing back the exiles and achieving peace in the land.

Second Reading Hebrews 10:5-10 - Whoever wrote this letter was very familiar with all the ritual and sacrificial worship of the Jerusalem Temple - which suggests that the document was written before 70 AD, the date of the destruction of the Temple by the Roman army - and for the benefit of Jewish priests who had become followers of Christ. We need to be reminded that the followers of Jesus didn't see themselves as preaching a new religion. The Temple priestly clan (Luke's gospel describes the Baptist's father as being one such) are being reassured that the religious ritual they have followed has been a preparation for the ultimate sacrifice of Christ. In today's reading, a verse is taken from Psalm 40, where God is pictured as rejecting the Temple sacrifices and burnt offerings as laid down in the Law. True service of God is to be found in obedience to his will - a personal rather than a legal relationship. The Law that demanded complete obedience to rules has been supplanted by the perfect sacrifice of obedience offered by Christ.

Gospel: Luke 1:39-44 - In the second half of what we call the 1st century AD, there were two revivalist movements in Judaism. One was a call to a wholehearted return to the spirit of the Covenant, signalled by a ritual washing the river Jordan, chosen as a reminder of the time the Israelites crossed over into what was for them the Promised Land. The other was the growing understanding that the execution of an itinerant Galilean preacher marked the beginning of a completely new relationship with God. Today's gospel reading provides a charming back story to link the two movements together: the Baptist's mission was in preparation for the coming of the Christ. On the threshold of Christmas, we are invited to be like the child in Elizabeth's womb, jumping with joy at the coming of the Saviour

Wednesday 25th December Christmas Day

There may be some readers who can recall the excitement of venturing forth to a real Midnight Mass (a special attraction at a time when you could only receive Communion fasting - work than one out!). There followed the Dawn Mass and then the final Mass when Christmas morning had fully arrived. Modern needs and preferences have largely diminished these distinctions, but I've kept to the titles.

MASS AT MIDNIGHT

First Reading Isaiah 9:1-7 - Towards the end of the eighth century BC the armies of the Assyrian Empire conquered the northern kingdom of Israel and deported many of the inhabitants of Galilee. Isaiah proclaimed this poetic oracle foretelling the birth of a king who would restore the fortunes of the people (if you remember from the first reading of last Sunday this was a recurring theme in response to the disasters threatening the region). Although the prophet was obviously thinking of the birth of a member of the current royal dynasty, his words from ancient times took on a much more profound meaning in the understanding of the first Christians, interpreting the prophecy as foretelling the miraculous conception and birth of Christ. The language is dramatic: reference to the joy of harvest time, release from slavery, triumph in the aftermath of conflict.

Second Reading Titus 2:11-14 - Written by a disciple, Paul is pictured writing towards the end of his life to one of his most loyal followers, placing emphasis on the need for a structured community under the leadership of wise elders who can guide their community. The earlier expectation of the imminent Second Coming of Christ has been modified over time, but the basis of the moral life must always be in the expectation of the final coming of the Saviour.

Gospel: Luke 2:1-14 - Once again, Luke is at pains to fix the historic moment. It is of little importance to us now that little or nothing is known about the census to which he refers – it might have been part of a general census for tax purpose, carried out locally by Quirinius, governor of Syria, of which territory Palestine was a part. The point is that Luke is emphasising that the birth is an historical event of universal importance to which the shepherds, people on the fringes of Jewish society, are the first witnesses.

DAWN MASS

First Reading Isaiah 62:11-12 - What we call the Book of Isaiah falls into two, possibly three, sections, written by different hands and at different times. Today's reading, part of a poem on the glorious restoration of Jerusalem, is taken from the final section. The saviour will come in triumph and his people will be called a "Holy People". We understand Jesus Christ to be that saviour who has made us into a holy people: that's an awesome thought as we watch the kids unpack their presents, wonder what embarrassment Uncle Arthur is going to come out with over the turkey and, for many of us, we agonise over how to pay the next instalment on the mortgage or the next rent payment.

Second Reading Titus 3:4-7 - This is a very brief text (see the comment on the earlier part of the letter at the Midnight Mass) stressing the gratuitous nature of God's gift. We are too often concerned about the merit of our actions: this reading puts our concern into perspective. Through Jesus we become heirs to God's kingdom – and only children are entitled to become heirs!

Gospel: Luke 2:15-20 - We continue the Birth narrative that started at the Midnight Mass. In Jewish tradition the kings, of whom David was the great example, were thought of as being the shepherds of their people, but in real every-day terms shepherds were men on the fringes: their occupation made it difficult to follow the religious demands of the Law, they were rough and ready, and mostly smelly. And Luke chooses these to be the first witnesses to the coming of the Saviour. The writer's theme throughout the gospel is the mission to the poor and the marginalised.

DAY MASS

First Reading Isaiah 52:7-10 - One of the best-known passages in what is known as Second Isaiah, the so-called Book of Consolation, this is a lyric song of praise and joy in the proclamation of God's restoration of his people. We are given a dramatic picture of the watchmen on the city walls under siege, after a night of gloom and despondency, seeing their saviour striding towards them. What wonderful

imagery is here: God is consoling his people! But how to translate this into our everyday lives? Make today one where we make a positive effort to re-enforce our affection for someone?

Second Reading Hebrews 1:1-6 - There is a popular but entirely erroneous idea that it is only in the New Testament that God speaks with love to his people. The lovely imagery of our first reading at this Mass ought to put paid to any such notion. But the author of Hebrews insists that whatever message was spoken through the prophets is brought to complete perfection only through the entry of Jesus into our world. In him, the perfect image of the Father, everything has been made perfect.

Gospel: John 1:1-18 - We are offered John's majestic and densely packed exposition on the One whose birth we celebrate today (the reference to the work of the Baptist is perhaps a later intrusion into the flow of the text). This mature reflection on the significance of Jesus presents him as the Incarnate creative Word of God, an image distinct from that presented in the other three gospels

Sunday 29th December Feast of the Holy Family

First Reading I Samuel 1:20-22, 24-28 - In this story we have to imagine a very different social world than ours. Hannah, the second of two wives of a man called Elkanah, was childless. She was taunted by the other wife, who had two children, but her prayer was answered and in thanksgiving she offered the infant, whom she called Samuel, to God. We might find Hannah's behaviour strange by our standards, but the point of the story is that the child, dedicated to God, is to become a great prophet.

Second Reading 1 John 3:1-2, 21-24 - We are God's children: the Spirit of God has been given to us and Jesus is our brother. We look forward to the completion of revelation, when we shall know God face to face and – an astonishing declaration – we shall be like him. We can have total confidence that whatever we ask for from God we shall receive because we live by the principles of belief in His Son and love for one another. But we should be careful of what we ask for!

Gospel: Luke 2:41-52 - This carefully constructed story is a "rehearsal" for the story of Jesus' passion, death and resurrection. Jesus is twelve so he's old enough to make the pilgrimage to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover. Because he's considered grown up his parents don't at first realise, he isn't with the group on the way back. Three days pass before the parents' search is rewarded, just as it will be on the third day that the women discover the empty tomb. The Resurrection is the revelation of the truth about Jesus, but the disciples could not at first seize that truth, any more than his parents could understand what this young man was up to.