

**OLAS SCRIPTURE COMMENTARIES MARCH 2025
YEAR C**

Sunday 2nd March **8th Sunday in Ordinary Time**

1st Reading: Ecclesiasticus: 27:5-8 - This is part of a collection of pithy sayings about how a person is to be judged: homespun philosophy collected by Ben Sirach, a Jew living probably in Alexandria in Egypt a century or so before Christ. Similar collections appeared in Egyptian writings, and we have our own homespun bits of philosophy: the apple never falls far from the tree, it's a wise child that knows its own father. The book is not part of the Jewish Bible and, although accepted by Catholics and Orthodox, is not considered as part of the biblical canon by Anglicans. The first readings at our Sunday Masses is chosen as a sort of introduction to the Gospel reading of the day. You can decide for yourself whether the choice always apt!

2nd Reading: I Corinthians 15: 54-58 - Pagan religions and philosophies offered at best a shadowy ghostly underworld after death (this underworld is what our Apostles' Creed badly translates as Hell). For the unbeliever death means the end of everything but for those who have accepted God's gift of faith death loses its dreadful finality. It seems likely that the reference to sin, death and the Law is a footnote by another hand, though in his later letter to the Romans Paul shows his belief that the Law cannot lead to salvation but only serves to show up human sinfulness.

Gospel: Luke 6:39-45 - A couple of parables, quite likely based on existing cautionary sayings like the ones quoted in the first reading, but they have been developed to more fully draw out their meaning. The first, about the splinter, is a good example of the dramatic exaggeration Jesus employs elsewhere (think of cutting off hands, plucking out eyes, millstones round necks). It is a technique that ensures the lesson is remembered

LENT

In the early Church people had to go through a long course of preparation before Baptism. The final stage was a forty-day intense period of fasting and prayer before the catechumens (the technical term for people preparing for baptism) were presented on Easter Sunday. As a sign of solidarity some of those already baptised began to share in their ordeal. This practice grew in popularity until it became an essential part of every Christian's Easter preparation. Note: if you do your counting including Ash Wednesday, Lent actually covers forty-four days. Why? Because every Sunday throughout the year was considered to be a celebration of Easter, a day of rejoicing, so it was inappropriate to abstain and fast on Sundays. If we still followed that line of thinking exactly, the priest's garments at Sunday Mass would be white instead of Lenten purple.

Wednesday 5th March Ash **Wednesday**

First Reading: Joel 2:12-18 - We can almost hear the complaint of the Jews returning from Exile only to find that the expected new age wasn't working out; they were still under the authority of the Persians, they had no king, and the Temple was in ruins: what does God care about us? A devastating plague of locusts, seen as a divine punishment for the people's infidelity, inspired the prophet Joel to call the people to a total renewal of fidelity to God. Although we aren't plagued by locusts (plagued with all sorts of other things, though) this clarion call to make a fresh start can still resonate with us today and provides the dramatic setting for another launch into the Lenten preparation for our yearly celebration of the central reality of our faith.

Second Reading: II Corinthians 5:20-6:2 - The background to today's reading is Paul's distress at some of the things his beloved converts in Corinth were getting up to: people claiming strange spiritual gifts, offering private insights that clashed violently with Paul's idea of reconciliation with God which is what life in Christ really meant. We aren't *subjects* of the Almighty, he reminds them, we share his glory, an awesome thought. And so it is logical for Paul say that we are ambassadors who must proclaim the new creation that has come about in Christ.

Gospel: Matthew 6:1-6, 16-18 - This passage presents a disturbing and enduring challenge to the Church. We have to admit that most of us like dressing up, and over the centuries people have dressed up the Church. Great architecture was created for the buildings to the glory of God, but how much was for the prestige of the people who commissioned the work? Intricate ceremonials have been invented, reverential titles given to those who lord it over the faithful. It is hard to reconcile all this with what we are reading today. For three hundred years after the Resurrection Christianity was a frequently persecuted movement (the earliest reference to the clothing worn by the celebrants at the Eucharist was that they should be clean!). The Roman Emperor Constantine legalised it and thus began the move to make it the state religion - the consequences were not always for the good!

Sunday 9th March **1st Sunday in Lent**

First Reading: Deuteronomy 26:4-10 - This book dates from the time when for the Jewish people the only place where sacrifice could be offered to God was the Temple in Jerusalem. Although dating from long after the time of Moses he is imagined as laying down precise rules for the conduct of worship. Today's reading concerns the way in which the first fruits of the harvest were to be offered. It recalls the history of Abraham the father of the nation, the time of slavery in Egypt, the Exodus across the desert and the entry into the Promised Land. This is a brief resumé of what is called Salvation History, a sort of declaration of faith and obligation laid on the worshipper. The act of offering was the worshipper's acknowledgement and thanksgiving for all this.

Second Reading: Romans 10:8-13 - "*The word...is very near too you,*" Speaking directly to the Jewish members of the Christian community in Rome, Paul is referring to the *Tefillin* the two black leather boxes with straps which are put on by adult Jews for weekday morning prayers, and are worn on the forehead and upper arm. The boxes contain extracts from the Torah, the first five books of the Bible which constitute the Jewish Law. Paul had not visited Rome, and this letter may have been by way of him introducing himself to the Jewish and Gentile Christian community already resident in the capital city of the Roman empire. The document is an attempt to illustrate that the Jewish Law, the code of faith by which generations of his fellow Jews had lived their lives, was a sort of anticipation of the fundamental break-through achieved in Jesus. But it is not by following the dictates of a code of Law – which could only bring into prominence the impossibility of compliance – that the individual is justified in the sight of God, whose gift – faith in the truth about Jesus – is what makes the person acceptable and so it matters not where you come from or who you are.

Gospel Reading: Luke 4:1-13 - Luke has combined Mark's version of the Desert retreat with that of Matthew and re-arranged the events so that the account, ending in Jerusalem, becomes a foreshadowing of the final drama of salvation ending with the final "testing" in Jerusalem. Luke's gospel places much emphasis on the action of the Holy Spirit in Jesus' ministry. The forty days in the wilderness reminds us of the story of the forty years the Israelites spent in the desert: for Jesus, as for them, this is a period of formation, of discernment. At the beginning of Lent, we are presented with this forceful lesson that the way that leads to the Cross and Resurrection is the way that rejects the attractions of what passes for earthly glory.

Sunday 16th March **2nd Sunday in Lent**

First Reading Genesis: 15:5-12, 17-18 - This might be called the foundation declaration of the Jewish, Christian and Muslim religions, the covenant, the divine promise to Abram to which all three religions trace their origin. The imagery used is far removed from anything in our experience, but the symbolism would have been familiar to the people for whom it was intended: it's a sacrifice sealing a treaty, a covenant, between two leaders. The smoking furnace and firebrand represent the Lord Almighty who is thus sealing his covenant with Abram. God has called him (later to be called Abraham, which perhaps means "Father of Nations") out of his own land but the promised offspring have not yet emerged. Upon his complaint to the Lord he is led to contemplate the multitude of the night sky as a promise of how numerous his descendants were to become. The key element in the story is that Abram puts his faith in God. Centuries later, Paul is to

use this declaration as a justification for his belief that observance of the Jewish Law isn't what saves the individual but the realisation of God's gift of faith.

Second Reading: Philippians 3:17-4:1 - Paul's letter to the community in Philippi shows something of the stark reality of what Christian communities could be like in the first century AD. There were disputes, confusions, arguments about the nature and the content of religious faith. It is quite possible that some of trouble stemmed from differences between those who had come to the faith from a pagan background and those of Jewish origin; between converts who thought being a follower of Jesus meant you had to live as a Jew and others who saw their faith in Jesus as setting them free from the dictates of the Law. Paul exhorts all his readers to imitate him, stick to what he has taught, and reminds them of their heavenly destiny.

Gospel Reading: Luke 9:28-26 - We may be forgiven for finding this symbolism at first confusing: the first readers would have found the imagery much easier to appreciate. In his account of the Transfiguration Luke intends to remind us of the story of the Exodus, where on Mount Horeb (Exodus 3:1-6), the Lord made himself manifest to Moses, and Mount Sinai which was covered in dense cloud when Moses received the Commandments from God. In the vision that Luke relates, Elijah and Moses, the greatest of the prophets, are seen conversing with Jesus, whose appearance reminds us of Moses on his descent from Sinai (Exodus 34:30), his face so radiant no one dared look at him. In the Exodus account, God's veiled presence is represented by the Shekinah, the Cloud. And it is from the Cloud that Luke pictures God again proclaiming the truth about Jesus, as at the time of his baptism in the river Jordan. And then this glimpse into the hidden truth about him is dissolved and the disciples find Jesus alone, same as ever.

Sunday 23rd March **3rd Sunday in Lent**

First Reading: Exodus 3:1-8,13,15 - A story of young Moses in Egypt. He had to flee the country after he had killed an Egyptian who was beating a fellow Israelite up by an Egyptian. As a refugee he tends the flocks of his father-in-law Jethro in the wilderness of Midian in the Arabian Peninsula. At Mount Horeb he comes face-to-face with God's presence. An interesting detail is that he has to take off his shoes because this is "holy ground". Muslims follow this command before entering the mosque today (*it makes sense when you think of all the unpleasant things shoes might tread upon that you don't want to bring into what you consider a holy place*). Moses is commissioned to be the saviour of his people, and he is given to know the mystery of the Name. We may find it difficult to appreciate the significance of this: if I tell you my name is Fred, that makes a degree of familiarity with you, but in Hebrew thought the person's name could reveal the person's true identity: it may be a secret name, known only to favoured "insiders." In this case the Name still remains mystery: the Hebrew "YHWH" is so sacred to Jewish tradition that although written it must not be pronounced aloud, and the name Adoni is substituted. In today's reading it is translated as "I AM" – perhaps best understood as "The Real, The True."

Second Reading: I Corinthians 10: 1-6,10-12 - This reading from Paul's letter is a reminder that it isn't enough to belong to the right "club". To illustrate this, he uses the story of the Israelites time in the desert. All the Children of Israel experienced the same wonderful manifestations of God's care for them – Paul refers to the legend that the Israelites in the desert were refreshed by a miraculous supply of "water from the rock" which he interprets as a symbol of baptism – yet many of them were unfaithful to the Lord. So, we must understand that we will be judged by the way we live our lives: redemption is not to be gained by claiming that we are members of the one true church. The implication is that "Faith" has to be demonstrated by one's behaviour, something that elsewhere the Apostles James was keen to remind his readers who might have been tempted to think that if you had "Faith" nothing else mattered.

Gospel Luke: 13:1-9 - These tragedies (there is no other record of either of the disasters referred to) are not the consequence of sin - it was popularly believed that disasters were in some way a divine punishment for wrong-doing. These unfortunates suffered physical death but were no more sinful than their neighbours. But then Luke has Jesus declare that those who refuse to turn from their sinful ways will suffer the same fate. A spiritual death? Or has the message been influenced by Luke's knowledge of the destruction the Romans wreaked on the country (including the destruction of the Temple) in 70AD? The following parable of the fig tree seems to back up this idea. The prophets spoke about Israel as God's vineyard: here the fig tree planted

in the vineyard represents the people to whom Jesus is preaching the good news. Luke, writing his Gospel some years later was able to use that destruction to give added weight to the story.

Tuesday 25th March **The Annunciation of the Lord**

First Reading Isaiah 7:10-14 - The background to this brief reading: The country of Judah was threatened by powerful enemies; Ahaz the king was tempted to make alliance with another foreign – pagan – country. Isaiah tells him God will protect him if he trusts in the Lord and maintains his independence, but Ahaz doesn't want to know – he's made his mind up. Nevertheless, Isaiah says, you will have a sign whether you want one or not. The birth of a boy child to a young woman, probably one of Ahaz's wives, will be the sign God doesn't abandon his people (later on, translations from the Hebrew original into Greek made "young woman" in "virgin". It was the Greek translation of the Bible the New Testament writers used more or less exclusively. Which explains why this text is taken as being prophetic of the virgin birth of Jesus, though Isaiah would have had in mind a successor to Ahaz whose great qualities would be in contrast to Ahaz's lack of faith in God's providence.

Second Reading Hebrews 10:4-10 - The annual Day of Atonement, by which the nation's sins were symbolically declared forgiven, was accompanied by the sacrificial slaughter of many animals. The writer, probably addressing his letter to former Temple priests who have become followers of the Way, declares something that the prophets of old had insisted upon – obedience to the will of God is what true religion is all about rather than ritualistic slaughter. So, he concludes, real forgiveness has been brought through Christ's obedience to his father's will.

Gospel Luke 1:26-38 - Luke accompanies his lovely story of Mary's acceptance of her role in salvation with a sign that contains echoes of the Old Testament. Abraham's wife Sarah was barren, but mysterious visitors announced that she would bear a son. Luke sees Elizabeth's pregnancy, foretold by an angelic vision in the Temple, was witness to the power and truth of God's promises.

Sunday 30th March **4th Sunday in Lent**

First Reading: Joshua 5:9-13 - The taking away of the "shame of Egypt" refers to the condition of slavery the Israelites had lived under as described in the Book of Exodus. Now at last after forty years of desert wandering, they are free, and they have entered the Promised Land and are about to celebrate their first Passover. It seems a rather odd choice of reading for this time in Lent, but it reminds us that our Passover is close at hand. We might remember Jesus' discourse after the feeding of the five thousand, that the people have been fed with bread, but their true food is the bread which is himself.

Second Reading: II Corinthians 5:17-21 - The Christian community in Corinth who were the recipients of this letter were probably for the most part among the humbler inhabitants of a cosmopolitan city who were racked with dissension and confusion about their new faith. Paul was writing to correct them but also to encourage them, holding out an ideal for them to live up to. No matter what their social status might be, they are part of God's new creation and so are ambassadors for Christ.

Gospel: Luke 15:1-3 11-32 - This, one of three parables about God's mercy (the lost sheep and the lost coin are the other two), is extended in great detail. The younger son isn't anything to write home about, avaricious, unprincipled, given over to a life of debauchery on the proceeds of his father's patrimony. Only when all his funds are exhausted does he come to his senses – rather like a politician's regret at being discovered with his hands in the till – and decides to return home. His father, who might justifiably have considered himself well rid of the lad, has obviously been on the lookout for his erring son and seeing him runs to envelop the boy in his love. Nothing is too good for this returnee. This image of God reminds us of John's simple explanation of the deity: "God is love". The elder son's character is one we easily recognise in ourselves!