

July 2nd 13th Sunday in Ordinary time

First Reading II Kings 4:8-11, 13-16 - This story might remind us of the tale told about the Abraham and Sarah who received the mysterious three angelic visitors. You will find that story in the Book of Genesis, chapter 18 (though in that story Abraham had already had another child by Sarah's slave girl). Heavenly promises of a man-child are also found, of course, in the New Testament - the Annunciation of the conception of Jesus and the promise made to Zechariah of a son by Elizabeth. Elisha is a wonder-working prophet and today's reading is only a fraction of the full story. A wealthy but childless woman admires him, shows him hospitality convinced he is a man of God. In return, Elisha wants to repay her hospitality and tells her she is going to have a child. So much for today's reading but the climax of the story comes later when the child grows up only to fall ill and die to be brought back to life by Elisha.

Second Reading Romans 6:3-4, 8-11 - We call this document a letter: it is really more like a defence of his conviction that his justification in the sight of God is a result of God's free gift, not thanks to his orthodox (Paul was a self-proclaimed Pharisee) fidelity to the Mosaic Law. We have to remember he was writing to Christians in the Roman Empire's capital city where we know there was a fairly substantial Jewish community. Paul had never been to Rome but he must have known how things were in Rome. We also know that the acceptance of the Good News wasn't quite the straight-forward affair it was sometimes made out to be. Jewish Christians felt the Jewish Messiah Jesus was the culmination of centuries of Jewish hopes and desires. They saw no reason, had no wish, to abandon their traditional practices. As Jesus himself is reported as saying in Matthew's Gospel, he had come to *fulfil* all the promises, not abandon them! Paul, however, was at the forefront of those Jewish Christians who saw God's promises as reaching beyond the Jewish world and he saw no value in forcing Gentile, non-Jewish, adherents to the faith - to conform to Jewish Law. There were Gentile converts in Rome as well as Jewish: could they both sit down together to celebrate the Lord's Supper? Couldn't Jewish Christians see that the Gentile Christians were their brethren, united in the common of faith.

Paul might well have seen the baptismal practice used by both sides as the basis of a persuasive argument. Baptism was by total immersion in water, plunging into the depths was symbolic of a kind of death, what rose from the water, Jew or Gentile, was a new life in Christ.

Of course, Paul was talking about adult baptism of people who had actively desired it (there is some evidence that by the second century AD children were being baptised and to this day in the Orthodox Churches, baptism of infants is by immersion). Baptists, by the very name, are only baptised as adults and a Baptist baptism is a very moving event, as the candidate declares before the congregation their reasons for seeking the sacrament.

Gospel Matthew 10:37-42 - This is violent language indeed, even making allowance for Middle Eastern dramatic exaggeration, a far cry from Gentle Jesus, Meek and Mild. What to make of it? Let's remember there were no short-hand reporters around at the time. Matthew, like any author, is moulding what he's been told about Jesus's teaching, in the light of his own experiences of what it meant to be a Christian. The "Jesus Movement" had become regarded by most authorities in the Jewish community as dangerous heresy. The Roman political power saw Christians as subversive deniers of Imperial supremacy. No doubt there had already been some who had fallen away from their first enthusiasm. There was always the possibility that the initial enthusiasm among converts might be toned down to a compromise. But to be a true Christian there could be no room for half measures. It had to be "all or nothing."

July 9th Fourteenth Sunday in Ordinary time - First Reading: Zechariah 9:9-10 - The prophet Zechariah was active about five hundred years before the birth of Christ. Thousands of Jewish people had come back from a deportation to Babylon (modern-day Iraq) that had endured for fifty years. They had returned with high hopes, but the reality was proving to be different. Now the exuberant expectations had given way to the gritty reality of life when so much depended on the whims of far greater powers than the minor kingdom of Judah. When times are dismal, hopes dashed, then thoughts turn to a golden future, as in this reading from the prophet, one of a series of oracles about the messianic king who will restore the fortunes of the nation. This king comes on a donkey, not on a war horse, because his will be an era of peace – no more battle chariots and weapons of war - and shall extend beyond the confines of Judah to encompass all the nations of the world. We might recognise the influence these verses had in the composition of the Gospel accounts of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem.

Second Reading: Romans 8:9, 11-13 - As we saw in the commentary on last week's reading this document is more of a thesis expounding Paul's understanding of the Good News than a mere "letter". Paul seems to have intended to visit the capital city on his way to Spain. The ethnic mix of Christians in the city, Jews who had only lately been allowed to return to the city after being banished by an earlier edict, and Gentiles, probably from all parts of the Empire, have an uneasy relationships with each other. The former pagan converts had established their own way of doing things, practices that were at odds with the attitude of the more conservative Jewish converts. In this passage Paul distinguishes between "unspiritual" - in today's language we might say "self-centred" - and "spiritual" - responding to the gifts God offers. The self-centred life is essentially destructive, but the person who is open to God grace has a grasp on the life of God himself.

Gospel Matthew 11:25-30 - What a contrast with last week's reading from Matthew's Gospel! Today's reading is taken from a chapter lamenting the lack of faith Jesus has found among his contemporaries. John the Baptist had announced his coming but those who heard him were like children playing silly games, never content with what is put before them. The towns where Jesus has proclaimed the Good News are condemned – if the things that have been done in them had been carried out in Tyre and Sidon the pagan inhabitants would have been converted, but Jesus' own kind, so proud of their status as God's Chosen People, didn't want to know. The great and the good might ignore him but his disciples, "mere children" in their lack of importance, are truly blessed because they know the Father through him and, whatever trials they may have to go through, God's love makes their burden light.

July 16th Fifteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time - First Reading: Isaiah 55:10-11 - The book known as Isaiah is in fact two separate works: the first (chapters 1 - 39) was produced about 700 years BC when the kingdom of Judah was threatened by neighbouring great powers: The second (chapters 40 onwards) was the work of another prophetic writer, about 150 years, writing as the years of exile in Babylon were coming to an end. Today's short passage is taken from this second part

In Biblical terms, the **word** is an active force, not merely a meaningful sound. We remember how, in the Book of Genesis, it is God's Word that effects creation - "God **said**...". The prophet uses imagery from nature: the rain and snow are not idle phenomena, their moisture makes the vegetation to grow, food to nourish mankind. So, it is with God's Word: he has promised his never-ending care for his people. So, even in their distress they must have confidence in God.

Second reading: Romans 8: 18-23 - This passage ought to appeal to those who understand the earth and all that is in it as being part of a single cosmic process, so that everything, from the Amazon rain forest to the summit of Everest, is in some way interconnected. Paul envisages the whole of creation as being in the process of giving birth to those who become followers of the Good News, children of God. He then carries the imagery a stage further by suggesting, in a rather mixed metaphor, that we too are involved in this:

pregnant by reason of having received the gift of the Spirit, we are preparing for the full coming to be of what God has in store for us. We might find some of the imagery rather fanciful, but we should be inspired by the idea that we are, however falteringly, involved in making God better known to the world

Gospel: Matthew 13:1-23 - This very long reading falls into two, possibly three, sections: firstly, comes the parable itself, drawn from the agricultural knowledge of the listeners: we have to imagine someone literally “broad casting” the seed by hand as he walks along, so the seed falls on a variety of surfaces. Even the good soil yields varying amounts of harvest. The audience have to draw their own conclusions from the short story: “Listen, anyone who has ears!” But, in response to the disciples asking for an explanation, Jesus gives a stark warning: the despair of Isaiah over the people of his generation is being confirmed by the attitude of so many of Jesus' contemporaries. Then follows the detailed elaboration for the benefit of the chosen few. The seed represents the Good News of the Kingdom, so by inference, the Sower is Jesus himself, and the varying surfaces represent the variety of people to whom the Good News is announced. Matthew was writing for his fellow Jewish Christians and was well aware of the different responses his own people had made to the teaching they had received from the Word of Life

July 23rd Sixteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time - First Reading: Wisdom 12:13. 16-19 - The Book of Wisdom was produced less than a century before the birth of Christ. Alexandria, on the Egyptian coast, was perhaps the most important centre of learning and was where Jewish scholars had translated their sacred writings into Greek, to make them more accessible to their fellow religionists spread through the Mediterranean world. The unknown author of the Book of Wisdom was familiar with current Greek philosophy and at the same time wanting to contrast the sophisticated world of Greek culture with the inherited wisdom of his own people. Today's reading is taken from a long passage in which the author sings the praises of God and all the things he has done for his often ungrateful people. Justice, mercy and forgiveness are the qualities the Lord shows towards us, and by inference these are the qualities which in us most reflect the glory of God.

Second Reading: Romans 8:26-27 - These verses follow directly on from last Sunday's reading. Paul is very aware that to talk of the distinction between the “unspiritual” and the “spiritual” is all very well, but in practice we sometimes find ourselves literally “lost for words” when we try to pray. This doesn't matter, Paul assures us. Alive with Spirit, we can be assured that God knows what we cannot express. I am reminded of the way Mother Teresa, when asked how she prayed, replied that she just listened to God. “And what does God say?” “He just listens to me”. This seems to sum up very well the point that Paul is making here.

Gospel: Matthew 13:24-43 - The first parable is another story in an agricultural setting. His hearers would have appreciated the absurdity of trying to eradicate the weeds from the field of growing corn and would have nodded wisely at the instruction given by the owner to leave everything until harvest time. Matthew then inserts two other parables, both about growth: the tiny seed that grows into an impressionable bush, and the action of yeast working secretly throughout the dough. During the Covid pandemic so many people took to baking their own bread: they would well understand this mysterious process by which a sullen lump of flour and water gradually swells, transform into a billowy cushion.

Then Matthew returns to his narrative about the parables being hidden teaching, the disciples private demand for explanation, and Jesus' explanation of the weeds and the harvest. A stark world picture, almost apocalyptic, is painted of the fortunes of the good and the bad, ending as in last week's reading: “He who has ears. Let him listen”. For Matthew the teaching is clear: the Christian community is a mixed bag: it includes all sorts but the judgement – the harvest time – is God's alone.

July 30th Seventeenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

First Reading: I Kings 3:5, 7-12 - The opening chapters of the Book of Kings (artificially divided into two) relates the bloodstained background to the accession of Solomon to the throne: palace intrigue: old debts are routinely paid off by assassinations by the new king's hitman. This gory introduction leads to this idyllic dream in which Solomon has a cosy discussion with God. While the king recognises his limitations and God rewards him by the gift of wisdom in such abundant measure that no one, past, present or future could every compare with him. A superb piece of publicity that is only the beginning of a detailed description of the endless magnificence of Solomon and his power in the region.

Second Reading: Romans 8: 28-30 - It is easy to interpret Paul's words as preaching predestination: the daunting doctrine teaching that our fate is sealed in advance by God, some to be saved, others to be condemned. But that is a later elaboration of Paul's understanding of what being called by God means. As a Jew and a Pharisee, he understood himself to be part of the Chosen People: as a convert to the Good News, he saw the redemptive work of Christ as being offered to all people, though he knew perfectly well that not all people, even amongst his own, responded to that call. What he was concerned with was the stupendous idea that those who do respond have Christ, Son of God, as their elder brother and so share in the life of God himself.

Gospel Matthew 13:44-52 - We continue our reading of Matthew's collection of parables. The first two are images of how precious possession of the kingdom is, more precious than anything else. The key word here is the word "rapturous joy" (rather lamely translated in our text as being "happy") experienced by the man who finds the treasure. To possess the kingdom is to having something beyond price. Matthew balances this euphoria with the cautionary parable of the dragnet, reinforcing the idea already expressed in previous parables: the kingdom here on earth is composed of all sorts, just like the dragnet that brings up good and useless fish. Only at the final judgement will the sorting out take place. For Matthew's audience, living in the "End Time" meant anticipation of the Final Judgement, perhaps within their lifetime. The concluding sentence indicates that in Matthew's community there were "scribes" - similar to the learned men among the Pharisees, whose task it was to "bring out things both new and old" - to interpret, tease out new meanings, from the parables.