

OLAS SCRIPTURE COMMENTARIES - Year A - AUGUST 2023

6th August The Transfiguration of the Lord

First Reading: Daniel 7:9-10, 13-14 - The work of several authors (the title is taken from the hero of the story), most probably written about 150 years before the birth of Christ, the book is a mixture of story-telling and fantastical visions. At the time of writing the Jewish people were being forced by their Greek speaking pagan conquerors to abandon their traditional religion and customs and adopt a more sophisticated "civilized" way of living. Today's reading is taken from one of the fantastical vision's sections of the book where Daniel sees God in all his majesty (the One of great age) being approached by "one like a son of man" to whom is given all power and authority. The title is an unusual way of describing a human being as opposed to the other worldly figure representing God. The author was clearly expressing a wish for a time when the Jewish nation, under a great leader, a king, who would throw off the alien yoke and make true religion known to the world. However, in the Gospels Jesus is described as using that same title "Son of Man" for himself: a clear allusion to seeking a deeper meaning to what the Book of Daniel described.

Second Reading: 2 Peter 1:16-19 - In the way he describes the vision Peter, James and John had of Jesus on the high mountain, in company with Elijah and Moses, the two great figures of Jewish religious history, the writer of this letter, using the prestigious name of the leader of the Apostles, clearly intends to remind his readers of Daniel's vision that we have had in the first reading today

Gospel: Matthew 17: 1-9 - The inner group of the disciples are privileged to have a glimpse of what lies hidden behind the familiar person of their leader. Matthew uses Old Testament imagery to describe the scene. The "Cloud" symbolises the presence of God. Moses, who received the Law from God on Mount Sinai, is the founding figure in Jewish religious belief, and Elijah is the first of the great prophets who interpreted the will of God. Matthew introduces this event as the prelude to Jesus' first intimation of his coming passion, death and resurrection. What seems at first sight the most astonishing thing about this revelation is the insistence that the disciples fail utterly to understand it. Or perhaps not: have not sometimes been confronted by something just too big to understand at the time?

13th August - Nineteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

First Reading I Kings 19:11-13 - The Books of Kings (there are two, but they really form one continual narrative) are a catalogue of mayhem, murder, intrigue and, from a religious point of view a clear tale of sustained infidelity to the worship of the true God. The kingdom of David and Solomon has been split in two: Israel in the north and Judah in the south, often at war with one another. King after king chases after foreign deities introduced by their foreign wives (it was always useful to acquire another wife as a pledge of peace with a neighbouring state). Against all this background a handful of "men of God" confront their wayward rulers - and are quite capable of massacring the priests of the foreign gods when they get the chance.

Today we read about Elijah, the first of the great prophets, who is on the run from the wrath of Ahab King of Israel, and his dastardly wife Jezabel, whose priests Elijah has liquidated. He takes refuge in the desert and is in such extremity that death would seem the best option. However, fortified by the angelic provision of bread and water, he makes his way through the wilderness for forty days and forty nights until he reaches the holy mountain Horeb. There, in a cave on the mountain, God reveals himself to his prophet, not in wind, earthquake or fire, but in a gentle breeze – the breath of God. Inspired by this revelation Elijah finds the courage to return to his mission of ridding the land of the worship of foreign gods. There is great subtlety in that description of God's presence, so fragile as to be easily missed by someone looking for great signs and wonders.

Second Reading Romans 9:1-5 - Despite his mission to bring the Good News to the Gentiles, Paul remains essentially not only a Jew but a Pharisee, knowledgeable in the scriptures, conscious of his membership of the People of God. So, the failure of so many of his fellow Jews to accept Jesus as the Christ, the promised Messiah, is a source of great anguish to him. Perhaps

he so emphasises his distress because of accusations that he has turned his back on his Judaism by preaching to the Gentiles. But his preaching is not something new; the Promises made to Israel, through the patriarchs and prophets, all the glories of their religion, have all been fulfilled in Jesus who is one of their own.

Gospel Matthew 14:22-33 - In the biblical tradition water has a variety of meanings. In the book of Genesis, out of the unformed chaos of water, God creates the ordered world. In their exodus from Egypt the waters of the Red Sea present an obstacle to the Israelites that only God can overcome. In the parched wilderness the Israelites are miraculously provided with water from the rock and the water of the river Jordan had to be parted before they could enter the Promised Land. John's disciples are bathed in the water of Jordan to signify their rejection of their old ways, and in the water of Christian baptism the convert dies to the past and begins a new life (a symbolism reduced to almost nothing in Catholic baptism but very much alive in the Baptist Church with total immersion). In today's reading Matthew takes the story as presented by Mark (6: 46-52) but gives it added significance. The wild storm prevents the disciples from making any headway, but recognising the divine power, they make their confession of faith in Jesus (in Mark's version they cannot understand what is happening to them). Matthew adds to the drama and inserts a useful lesson by describing Peter's attempt to reach the Lord (there seems to be some echo here of Thomas' reaction to the Resurrection appearances of Jesus). Invited by Jesus but hampered perhaps by his lack of total faith, he sinks, and he must be rescued by Jesus.

20th August Twentieth Sunday in Ordinary Time

First Reading Isaiah 56:1,6-7 - Back in the 70s the pop group Boney M made a record hit with Psalm 137, "By the waters of Babylon," lamenting how impossible it was to sing the Lord's praise in a foreign land. But perhaps the experience of exile in Babylon gave a new perspective to the understanding of the Covenant. The author of this second part of the Book of Isaiah offers a share in God's promises to "God Fearers" - foreigners who, while remaining outside the household of Israel, worship the true God. The extent of the radical nature of this understanding is revealed in the final sentence of today's reading: "my house will be called a house of prayer for all the peoples".

Second Reading Romans 11: 13-15,29-32 - Paul says he is using non-Jews as a way of making the Chosen People jealous. It is only because so many of them have rejected the Good News that people like Paul have turned to the pagans, and his hope is that when the Chosen People see what a difference the Good News makes to the lives of the pagans, they will want to share in this too. In Paul's mind, good can come out of bad, just as Adam's fault was described as a "happy fault" because the resulting redemption wrought by Christ was so much greater. There is an important lesson here in Paul's assertion that "God never takes back his gifts or revokes his choice". The Chosen People will always be the chosen people and we Gentile people should be humbly grateful that the same God has opened his love to us.

Gospel Matthew 15:21-28 - Jesus has led his followers into foreign territory, what is now Lebanon. How embarrassing it must be for these high-minded preachers to be followed about by a demented woman screaming after them! And a foreign woman at that! They would do anything to be rid of her. We have to remember that Matthew's Gospel was intended for Jewish people who accepted Jesus but wished to remain faithful to their traditions. Jesus' apparently harsh reply is faithful of his mission to Israel: the message of the Kingdom is not for "dogs." The English are supposed to be a nation of dog lovers so perhaps the strength of the insult is not appreciated. So, the story becomes a subtle way of reminding the readers that outsiders, Gentile people, are also entitled to a share in the Good News. The woman is not daunted, she neatly turns the argument against him; even the dogs get to eat the bits and pieces that the children let fall to the floor. This boldness defeats him! Her faith needs to be rewarded.

27th August Twenty-first Sunday in Ordinary Time

First Reading Isaiah 22: 19-23 - Shebna is described as "master of the palace". For unspecified faults, he is dismissed and another, Eliakim, is appointed in his place. Under the king, the post of master was the most important in the country, with complete authority over the affairs of the

palace. The text goes into some detail about the investiture procedure: the robes of office and the key to the palace, probably a fairly massive affair, symbolically placed on the shoulder of the newly appointed master, signifying, as we would say, that he was literally shouldering a heavy burden; that he had extensive power to decide who should be admitted to the royal presence, who should be excluded. What seems to be a rather obscure choice of reading becomes obvious when we turn to the gospel.

Second Reading Romans 11:33-36 - For all their failure, Paul's fellow Jews are beloved by God because of who they are. He compares the Gentiles among his readers to a wild olive shoot that has been grafted on to the true olive tree, to share its riches (Paul was a tent maker by profession. I wonder how much agricultural knowledge he had? Normally one would graft a true olive onto wild stock so as to get the benefit of the vigour of the wild to promote the true. But we get his meaning). He concludes this section of his letter with the passage we read here today. God has turned the failure of the Chosen People to the advantage of the Gentiles (if all the Jew had accepted Jesus as Messiah, the Gentiles might never have been invited to share in the kingdom he proclaimed). He illustrates the mystery of God's working by a quotation, slightly adapted, from Isaiah 40:13.

Gospel Matthew 16:13-20 - Caesaria Philippi was a pagan city, which is perhaps why Jesus is described as being in the region rather than in the town. People were talking about this new prophet who was attracting so much attention, comparing him to John the Baptist, the great prophet Elijah, or Jeremiah who suffered so much for his fidelity to the word of God. Jesus' companions are challenged to make their own assessment, and Simon Peter speaks on their behalf. In the thinking of the time, "Messiah" had distinct political overtones. The word means "Anointed One" which was another way of saying King. Matthew wants to make it clear that Jesus' "kingdom" is of a quite different sort. Did Simon already have a nickname (Cephas – Rock - in Aramaic)? If so, Jesus gives it a new twist – Simon is to be the rock on which the "community" is to be based. By the time Matthew's Gospel was written the Greek word "ekklesia", meaning community, had acquired a special sense among the followers of Jesus – the community of God's faithful, of which Peter is seen to be the leading authority. But though the disciples recognise him, the Messianic identity of Jesus is to be kept secret from the general public for the time being.