

OLAS SCRIPTURE COMMENTARY

SEPTEMBER 2023

Sunday 3rd September - Twenty-second Sunday in Ordinary Time

First Reading Jeremiah 20:7-9 - Jeremiah: the poor man's name became a byword for a misery-guts. He lived at a time when the political rivalry between the great powers of Egypt and Babylon was at its most intense and the little kingdom of Judah was the filling in the middle. Jeremiah's message - that political alliance with one side or the other wouldn't work; only through fidelity to God's commands could the nation survive - was treated by many as nothing but treason and Jeremiah in consequence was treated abominably. In the opening words of today's passage, the prophet accuses God of being the origin of his misfortune – "it's all your fault, Lord!" Often enough he has determined not to have anything more with the thankless task God has set him: his only reward is insult and derision. But he has no choice, he has to stick to his mission; God has overwhelmed him. There are times when even the most fervent believer feels overwhelmed by misfortune. Is the answer to give up or to cling on desperately to a belief in God's love?

Second Reading Roman 12:1-2 The Jews among the Christians in Rome had one advantage: a clear tradition of the worship and service of the one true God. The former pagan converts in Rome never had such clear guidance in their lives; their religious background was of multitude gods and goddesses whose capricious behaviour needed constant tribute. By putting their faith in Jesus they are now under an obligation to do all in their power to be worthy of their new calling. The Jewish tradition of sacrificial offerings in the Temple (it was still standing when Paul was writing this letter) should be their model for behaviour, offering the whole of their lives in God's honour. Their conversion has brought about a completely new way of life that cannot be allowed to be influenced by material values. We, most of us at any rate, find it hard to understand how the acceptance of Jesus as Saviour transformed the lives of those people. We had no say about our baptism. We might have been brought up by practising Catholic parents, attended Catholic schools, but has there ever been a point in our lives when we have said, yes, no contest, this is for me?

Gospel Matthew 16:21-27 This is the first of three predictions of the Passion. Matthew is writing with the benefit of hindsight but Jesus would have been able to see, at least in general terms, what his mission would lead him to. Peter, probably filled with hopes of some glorious achievement, was naturally horrified at this talk of suffering and death. But Jesus is realistic: the only way he can avoid suffering is by abandoning his mission. By the time Matthew's gospel was written the Jewish authorities had effectively excommunicated the followers of Jesus, and so the protection the Roman Empire that had been afforded to Jews (for instance, absolving them of the necessity of making the token sacrifice to the emperor as a god) was no longer extended to them. Thus, the warning that the followers of Jesus would have to accept suffering was very real. The passage concludes with the reminder that riches and worldly success count for nothing in the eyes of God.

Sunday 10th September Twenty-third Sunday in Ordinary Time

First Reading Ezekiel 33:7-9 - Writing during that doom-laden time when the kingdom of Judah was on the point of being destroyed by the army of Babylon, Ezekiel pictures himself as a watchman on the city walls, on the lookout for points of danger, to warn of attack. But his job isn't to warn of foreign invasion: he is to be God's guardian of his own people's moral behaviour, his duty to bring them to recognition that they are at fault in the eyes of God. It's easy to have a rose-tinted view of the history of the Chosen People. In actual fact though the official state of religion was adherence to Yahweh, God of Israel, both rulers and ordinary people were often far more attracted to the local deities and the hilltop sacrifices made to please them. Ezekiel's was an onerous task: if he failed to carry out his responsibilities then he would bear the guilt of the others downfall. "Am I my brother's keeper?" was the cry that went up from Cain when God asked him about the fate of Abel. Ezekiel would have answered with a resounding, "Yes, you are!"

Second Reading Romans 13:8-10 - The nature of the “living sacrifice” that we heard of in last week's reading is spelled out by Paul: love, not hate, is to be their guiding rule, blessing even those who persecute them, live in peace with them, feed them if they are hungry, be good citizens. This exhortation ends with the passage we are reading today. Paul repeats what had always been seen as the foundation of the Jewish Law and which the Gospels adopt as the fundamental law of the Christian person: the command to love one another sums up in a single sentence all the complexity of moral obligation. Working this out in daily life is much more difficult than stating the principle, a constant challenge. I'd be a liar if I claimed to live up to that ideal. Even within my own family I have favourites and I incline to the attitude of "there's so much misery in the world, what can I do about it"? Maybe we should adopt something of Jewish thinking: it's better to light one candle than to curse the darkness, and to save one life is as if to save the whole world.

Gospel Matthew 18:15-20 - Matthew was writing for the benefit of a Christian community built on Jewish traditions and he provides a threefold rabbinical style procedure for dealing with offenders in the community: first the individual approach, then “one or two” (following Jewish legal requirement for the acceptance of witness testimony). If all else fails, the case should be heard before the whole community, a full rabbinical style hearing. The disciples are given the same authority as Peter, for determining disputes - “binding and loosing” are rabbinical legal terms for expelling or allowing back someone into the community. This passage of the Gospel is only remotely connected to what we know to day as *Confession* of the sacrament of *Reconciliation*. In the early Church someone who had grossly betrayed Christian ideals had a on once in a life-time chance of being accepted back into the community, a precess sometimes known as a *lifeboat* through public penance before a formal readmission to the Eucharist. When Irish monasticism became missionary, spreading out across Europe, it carried with it the monastic custom of frequent admission of faults and failings to the abbot, a custom that gained popularity with the people who flocked to their churches. Frowned upon by Church authorities at first, it gradually became accepted as the norm, thus developing into the practice we know today.

We should take note of the final promise in today's reading: the Lord being present wherever even a few meet in his name: here at Mass we should learn to appreciate we are not a random collection of strangers.

Sunday 17th September Twenty-fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time

First Reading Ecclesiasticus 27:30 -28:7 - Ecclesiasticus: the book is so called because it isn't part of the Hebrew Bible but has been used as a “Church” book from early times, It is a collection of proverbial wisdom with additional commentaries. Today, Ben Sirach (the author of the work), turns his attention to the evils of resentment, anger and vengeance. His views on these failings might be summoned up along the lines of “what you dish out will come back to bite you”. More profoundly, we are reminded of the words of the Lord's prayer, that we seek forgiveness for our faults in the measure that we forgive the faults of other people towards us. God is the ultimate judge of our actions, for which there will be a day of reckoning. Ben Sirach's instruction to remember the commandments and not resent one's neighbour ill-will follows the rabbinic teaching emphasised by Our Lord: to love one's neighbour is the sum of all the commandments.

Second Reading Romans 14:7-9 - This very short reading comes at the end of a passage in which Paul admonishes those who criticise others for their dietary behaviour or their failure to respect special days. Nothing to do with slimming fads or veganism. We have to remember in his audience there were converts from paganism who might buy their meat from the leftovers of sacrifices in the local temples – something abhorrent to Jews - while the Jews observed “holy days” which had no significance for gentiles. Someone in the mixed bag of Christian converts in Rome might despise a fellow believer who didn't scruple to use sacrificed meat, another one might have disregard for those among them who set store by special days. Then comes today's reading. In a very convoluted couple of sentences Paul is saying that it makes no difference who or what we are, provided that all we do is motivated by love of the Lord. All of us died with Christ (in baptism), all of us live with Christ (in his Kingdom, here on earth).

Gospel Matthew 18:21-35 - In Luke's gospel the instruction about forgiveness is given in a single verse (Luke 17:4). Here Matthew expands the teaching and adds a loosely connected cautionary tale to forcefully illustrate the need for forgiveness. "Seventy times seven" is a dramatic way of getting across the message that forgiveness has to be unconditional, something that, as Peter realises, can be incredibly difficult. Parents have been known to throw out their children who don't conform to their standards: other parents seem endlessly willing to forgive: "he/she is still my child."

A talent was a weight of silver, worth several thousand pounds in modern money, so "ten thousand talents" is equivalent to our expression, "a king's ransom". On the other hand, a Roman denarius (a silver coin about the size of a 5 pence piece) was a day's wages for a labouring man. The fate of the unforgiving servant is dramatically terrible.

Sunday 24th September - Twenty-fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time

First Reading Isaiah 55:6-9 - This exhortation to conversion speaks of God's readiness to take back the sinner (We might think here of the way the Prodigal Son is treated by his father). The prophet contrasts the way God judges with our human manner of judging others. Many a person coming out of prison has discovered that, with a "record", it is difficult to find work. People are often judged, detrimentally and not unnaturally, on past performance. But God isn't like that, the prophet says. Is it possible for us to adopt a similar strategy: looking to the potential of a person rather than past actions? It's an ideal, lovely in theory, very difficult in practice.

Second Reading Philippians 1:20-24, 27 - Philippi, in Macedonia, was originally a Greek city but had been elevated under Roman rule so that all its inhabitants were classed as Roman citizens. There were few Jewish people living there and we know from Acts of the Apostles that they didn't have a synagogue. So most of Paul's converts there would have been Gentiles. This letter was written, about the year 57AD, at a time when Paul was in prison. His courage in suffering ill treatment seems to have been a source of inspiration to many, for which he rejoices in today's short reading. He indicates that execution was a possibility but, dead or alive, he is still confident that he is bearing witness to Christ. Paul survived that time: and is supposed to have been executed in Rome and there is today a church on the site.

Gospel Matthew 20:1-16 - This familiar story is wedged between statements that "the first shall be last and the last shall be first", a declaration that the generosity of God towards the faithful cannot be quantified – all will receive what they deserve. The story of the vineyard workers isn't to be taken as a guide for determining fair wages in union disputes with employers! The labourers are not idlers, they stand in the accustomed place, ready to work. Each group in turn is promised a fair reward for their work. Some are chosen from early morning, others during the course of the day, the last few only an hour before nightfall. Yet at the end, each one receives an identical payment, the standard rate for a whole day's work. It doesn't matter whether one comes early or late to the work of the Lord, the reward will be ample.

The parable makes more sense if we remember that Matthew's Gospel was written for Jewish Christians. There must have been some resentment that they were expected to treat the despised pagans as equals in the community of the believers. The message then becomes: it doesn't matter whether you come early or late to faith in Jesus Christ. All that matters is you are ready for the call when it comes. There was a time, perhaps not so much these days, when so-called "cradle-Catholics" stupidly tended to treat the enthusiasm of converts with some suspicion.