

**Sunday 1st October Twenty-sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time**

**First Reading Ezekiel 18:25-28** - A bit of background to put this passage into context. Ezekiel was active at the time when the kingdom of Judah had been overcome by the mighty Babylonian empire, Jerusalem and other cities in ruins, people deported. This happened 600 years before Christ. A long time ago but it sounds so contemporary. They fought with swords and spears in those days, not bombs, assault rifles and fighter planes, but the human dilemma was just the same. We can imagine the deported population lost, confused and angry. Why did God let this happen to them? The religious answer was they had brought it on themselves but then the prophet goes on to talk about personal responsibility and the possibility of change. And if an evil man turns from his wrongdoing and begins to keep God's law, his former bad deeds will not be remembered against him. The justice of God is measured against the corrupt standards of Ezekiel's contemporaries. We are sometimes too ready to judge a person by previous behaviour, not willing to give credit for a change of heart.

**Second Reading Philippians 2:1-11** - For Paul the distinctive mark of the follower of Christ should be a selfless humility. He uses a strong word that usually means an abject condition, here translated as self-effacing. The unity of the community depends upon the members thinking of each other rather than themselves. To illustrate his point he makes use of a hymn that must have been in use at Christian gatherings. Christ Jesus emptied himself of his divine nature, to become like a slave (we might not appreciate the force of this word – a slave was nothing but a “living machine” to many of Paul's contemporaries), and even lower, accepting death on the cross, the most disgusting form of execution known to the Roman world. By his abasement his Father has raised him to glory beyond all creation. We might wonder why Paul makes such a song and dance about fellowship and unity, considering the other person's position. The answer seems to be that even in the earliest Christian communities there was as much human self-regard, judgmental attitudes, as we find in modern society. The present Pope is criticised for not “laying down law, sticking to the rules”. It's because he sees the way forward is by meeting people where they are. The head of my seminary, years ago remarked shortly before his death, “I spent the first thirty years of my priesthood trying to bring people to the Kingdom, and the second thirty years trying to bring the Kingdom to people.”

**Gospel Matthew 21: 28-32** - Matthew's version of Jesus' little story about the two sons might well be the source of the elaborate story drawn in Luke's Gospel that we know as “The Prodigal Son”. The message in Matthew's story is straightforward: it isn't the talking that makes you right, it's the doing. Jesus' condemnation of the religious leaders of his day, that they were not willing, presumably because they thought themselves too good, to listen to the message of the Baptist, unlike the dregs of society who recognised their neediness. And when these despised people changed about, “repented”, the high-minded religious intellectuals still wouldn't accept they themselves were wrong. I remember taking part in the Easter celebration in a church somewhere in the south of England. The service had just started when a Romany family came into the church. Would we?

**Sunday 8th October - Twenty-seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time**

**First Reading Isaiah 5:1-17** - What we call the Book of Isaiah is in fact two separate works, one produced just before the terrible trauma of the Babylonian Exile and the second written fifty years later when the deported Jewish population were about to be allowed to go home. Today's reading is from that first part. The writer sees the impending disaster as the consequence, in large part, of the country's leaders and the people falling away from the standards set by their Covenant with God. The vineyard is a favourite allegory for the Chosen People. There is great tenderness in the picture of the “friend's” care for his vineyard, which makes all the more terrible his distress at its failure to produce the desired crop and the fate that awaits the unproductive land. The allegory is obvious: Isaiah was active as the threat of the nation being devoured by Babylon was ever more menacing and the prophet saw its doom as being a direct consequence of their failure to remain faithful to the Covenant with God.

**Second Reading Philippians 4: 6-9** - This passage is from the concluding paragraphs of this short letter, full of encouragement for the Christian community in the city. From an earlier part of the document it is clear that the largely Gentile community was being bothered by Jewish Christian missionaries who were

insisting that to be a follower of Christ one had to adopt Jewish ways. Paul, himself a very orthodox Jew - a Pharisee - was vehemently opposed to such teaching and in consequence is all the more encouraging. of his little flock of Gentile converts. His exhortation to pray that they will be able to live their lives in the inner peace that comes from God ends with what could be summed up as an encouragement to “keep up the good work!”

**Gospel Matthew 21: 33-43** - The context of this reading is important. Jesus has arrived in Jerusalem and while teaching in the Temple courtyard is interrogated by the senior clergy and leading lay people as to what right he has to be teaching. The answer is a re-working of the story in Isaiah. The “friend” is now the “absentee landowner” and it isn't the vines that are unproductive but the tenant farmers who are wicked and want the vineyard for themselves. In the end, after his servants have been treated abominably, the landowner sends his son, who in turn is murdered. The nature of parable is its fluidity: at one level “tenants” are the very people who are questioning Jesus' authority, the vineyard being Israel or even the city of Jerusalem (the son is taken out of the “vineyard” to be executed) but is also symbolic of the Kingdom of God which is being opened up to the Gentile world.

### **Sunday 15th October - Twenty-eighth Sunday in Ordinary Time**

**First Reading Isaiah 25: 6-10** - Although Isaiah foresaw the destruction of the nation by the invading Babylonians, he could also offer words of consolation. The ruined temple *will* be restored, God will once again be “enthroned” on his holy mountain (the mountain is the hill on which Jerusalem is built) and the people will be invited to a royal banquet. But the prophet's vision goes further than imagining a time of restoration of the nation: for to this banquet all nations will be invited. Death itself will be defeated - the mourning veil or shroud may be thought of the earth covering the graves of the dead: in other words, the dead will rise again. There will be no more mourning, no more tears. So, the divine banquet becomes a metaphor for the final realisation of God's Kingdom. This was written 600 years before Christ, at a time when even the Jewish people tended accept that other nations had their own. And here Isaiah is proclaiming that the Kingdom is destined to be for all the world. Precisely what he meant by that we shall never really know in detail but somehow his mind was able to leap the bounds of his own time.

**Second Reading Philippians 4:12-14, 19-20** - This is a touching “thank you” to Paul's Christian friends in the city of Philippi. If you read the whole of the final chapter of this short letter you will see how grateful he is for their generosity: they've made a collection for him (perhaps while he was in prison in Ephesus) and sent it to him by one of their number. They've helped him more than once, he says, more than any of the other places he's visited. In a flash we see something of the man himself rather than the remote author of deep theology. He lived through all sorts of circumstances: sometimes with hardly two pennies to rub together, other times able to enjoy a slap-up meal now and then, muddling along as best he can without complaint: but the money is welcome, and he thanks them for their concern for his welfare. God will reward their generosity, just as he gives Paul the strength to face up to anything.

**Gospel Matthew 22:1-14** - Here's an example of how the different Gospel writer moulded their material to their needs.

You might like to compare today's reading with Luke's version (Luke 14:15-24). Matthew has adapted the parable into three sections: the original invitation, the refusal of those invited and the extension of the invitation to all and sundry. The banquet is a reminder that the story looks forward to the completion of the Kingdom of God in which the Christ (the son in the story) is honoured. The parable is addressed to the chief priest and the elders – those who are supposed to be closest to the word of God – who must have understood the significance of the invited guests. The destruction of their city is a reference to the sack of Jerusalem by the Romans in AD 70, which places the writing of this Gospel towards the end of the first century. Now the Divine banquet is open to all, good and bad alike. Matthew ends the story with a warning: just because one is in the Christian community doesn't give grounds for complacency.

### **Sunday 22nd of October- Twenty-ninth Sunday in Ordinary Time**

**First Reading Isaiah 45: 1,4-6** - This reading is taken from the second part of the book we call Isaiah. The trauma of the Babylonian Exile was brought to an end by the Persian king Cyrus. After conquering the power of Babylon, he issued a decree that all the peoples who had been uprooted should be allowed to return to their homelands. For fifty years a significant proportion of the Jewish people had lived hundreds of miles away from home. People had got married, had kids, people had died, families had split up, some had done

quite well out of this ,thank you - equivalents of World War II Spivs - others had led miserable existences. Most had lived miserably. For many the whole religious aspect of their lives had been turned upside down. The author of this section of the book sees the mighty Cyrus as a sort of unconscious messiah, saviour, of the people. Although the king didn't know it, says the prophet, God's purposes were at work in him, for the sake of the Chosen People. The closing verses of the passage show how the notion of divinity had been refined in Jewish thinking. Originally, the Israelites might have thought that although Yahweh was their Lord, other nations had their own gods: then there was a dawning realisation that God was Lord of all, that apart from him "all is nothing."

**Second Reading I Thessalonians 1: 1-5** - Thessalonika (Modern Thessaloniki) was an important Roman city in northern Greece with a large Jewish population. From the tone of this letter, we get the impression that Paul had spent quite some time there. His companions, Timothy and Silvanus, join him in sending greetings to the largely Gentile Christian community that he had established. From the exuberant tone of the final verse, we get the impression that Paul's teaching had been received with great enthusiasm. In a pagan world the message that there was a God of love - and a life in the heavenly world to come - must have come as an exhilarating force for transformation in their lives. It has to be said the Christian message also came in for a lot of mockery. Someone around the year 200AD scrawled on a plaster wall in Rome a crude outline of a crucified human-like figure with a donkey head and underneath, another outlined figure with the words *Alexamenos worships his god*.

**Gospel Matthew 22: 15-21** - This text is often used to illustrate the separation between Church and State, Jesus instructing his followers to be good citizens. There might be a different interpretation. Jesus naively asks to see a coin of tribute money, a Roman coin. Tiberius was the reigning emperor at the time, and the coinage had his head on one side and on the reverse a divine figure referring to his alleged qualities: liberality, justice, and so on. "So," we can almost see Jesus peering at the head on the little coin he is offered (a denarius was about the size of a five-penny piece), "this head. Who is it?" As an adult inhabitant of a Roman province he knew full well what it was and who the figure represented. On being told it is the head of the emperor, he says, equally naively, "Then it must belong to him and you had better give it back to him!" Then, looking up, he says, to the point, "And you, you had better give to God what is due to Him!" In other words, "don't involve me in your political intrigues." It is, incidentally, a typical rabbinic style of argument and would be well appreciated by Matthew's largely Jewish readership.

### **Sunday 29th October - Thirtieth Sunday in Ordinary Time**

**First Reading Exodus 22: 20-26** - Today's reading delves to the heart of religious commitment, measured not in the number of prayers one says, nor in the length of time one spends in meditation, but to the extent that one brings justice, God's justice that is, to one's fellow human being, regardless of who that might be. The needs of the widow or the orphan who had no one to support them, there was no welfare state in those days, could not be ignored. We need to understand the ancient world's concept of money. Coins had, literally, a face value. We use coins (and notes) as tokens, but a silver or gold coin was worth the silver or gold it contained. So, money wasn't like crops in the field: it couldn't grow and multiply like crops and so it was wrong to expect interest on a loan (although this only applied to loans between fellow citizens: foreigners were fair game). A poor person didn't have a comfy duvet for the night-time, so to take a cloak as surety ran the risk of a person going cold. All these pieces of legislation might seem quaint today, but the principle remains perfectly valid. As human beings we have a relationship with other human beings and a responsibility to respect their human dignity. I worked for some years in Rwanda where many people even today live on the breadline. One of my friends told me that as a child he'd seen a woman grubbing up vegetables from the family plot. He'd run to tell his mum. "It's bad enough," his mother replied, "that the poor woman is reduced to taking the food like that without you drawing attention to it."

**Second Reading I Thessalonians 1:5-10** - Paul's former pagan converts have become a by-word in the whole of northern Greece for their fidelity to the Gospel. The opposition he refers to might have been from the Jewish community in the city. In this, the earliest Christian document we have, the expectation that the Second Coming would not be long delayed is evident. There was to be a dreadful day of judgement from which those faithful to the Lord would be rescued. If we have any conception of a Day of Judgement it is something in the unimaginable future but we should remember we all face a personal ultimate reckoning.

**Gospel Matthew 22:34-40-** The final crisis is being played out in and around the precincts of the Temple. The clergy would be among the party of the Sadducees, those who kept to a conservative idea of religion expressed especially in the ritual of the Temple. The Pharisees on the other hand were in many ways a popular modernising party, especially strong in the synagogue worship that had developed since the time in Exile. Their enthusiasm for religious observance and ritual had led to a minute interpretation of every aspect of the Law: it was by such meticulous observance that the true believer could be distinguished from the backslider. They were determined to catch Jesus out, perhaps hoping that whichever commandment he offered as the greatest, they could counter by saying, “Ah, but what about...?” Instead, Jesus reminds them of the fundamentals of religious observance upon which no matter what detail of religious law depends.