

## NOVEMBER SCRIPTURE COMMENTARIES

### **Wednesday 1st November THE FEAST OF ALL SAINTS**

**First Reading Apocalypse 7:2-4, 9-14** - This majestic image of the last days pictures the final triumph of Jesus Christ and the gathering together of all the faithful. Numbers are important - 144000 is the prophet's way of saying a vast multitude, all the God's gathered faithful from every race. Their manner of celebration would have been familiar to the original readers- waving of palm branches (think of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday) and bowing to the ground before the throne, much in the manner of Muslim prayer today. The extraordinary language used by the writer, around the end of the first century AD can best be understood as a kind of exotic poetry a heavily coded message of hope and resistance at a time when Christianity was coming under severe persecution from the authorities.

**Second Reading I John 3:1-3** - The use of the imagery, "God's children", is a far cry from the awesome majestic deity language of some of our prayers. This lovely poetic description of how we shall come to know God should be a source of encouragement to all who are struggling with life's problems. There's a closeness, an intimacy. There is little more that can be added!

**Gospel Matthew 5:1-12** - You might call The Beatitudes the "job description" of all Christians. Jesus delivers his authoritative declaration on the hilltop. A better word might have been "mountain top" because Matthew is inviting us to recall Moses ascending Mount Sinai to receive the Law from God. Here Jesus doesn't *receive* the Law, he *gives* the Law. The present difficulties through which the believer struggles are set against the spiritual rewards. It is difficult not to think that in setting things out in this way Matthew had in mind readers who were disheartened by their sufferings.

### **Thursday 2nd November THE COMMEMORATION OF ALL SOULS**

**First Reading: Isaiah 25:6-9** - Writing at a time of great political and economic upheaval, the prophet set out to reassure the people of God's abiding love and a promise of eventual salvation and triumph over all evil. Today we remember all the dead. The doctrine of Purgatory is something that developed in the early centuries of the Church's history, trying to answer the question, what happens to people who die without being perfect enough to immediately be in the presence of God? Purgatory was thought of as a time of expiation for sins and some lurid notions of flames and torment became popular. Back in the 1960s my old theology professor suggested we might think of Purgatory as the moment of sublime enlightenment when, as St John puts it, we see God face to face, as he really is, and all our inadequacies are stripped away.

**Second Reading: Romans 5:5-11** Paul was writing to adults who had responded to the teachings about Jesus by committing themselves to God. But they must have been aware that there were times when their lives didn't live up to that ideal - as Paul was aware in his own life. They should be assured that Christ's sacrifice ought to make them confident of God's overwhelming love.

**Gospel: John 6:37-40** - The gospel continues this theme of confidence in the love of God. The passage is taken from Jesus' discourse with his disciples at the Last Supper. On this day when we remember those who have died, we can't help being reminded of our own death. As Christians Jesus' words should give us the courage to fight through our own failings with confidence.

## **5th November THE THIRTY FIRST SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME**

**First Reading Malachi 1:14-2:2, 8-10** - Malachi (Hebrew, the name means: "My Messenger") is completely unknown apart from this work, probably dating from some time after the end of the Exile, four hundred years or more before Christ. Although the book supports the *notion* of the Temple priesthood, the writer is fiercely critical of the way they **behave**, as we see in today's reading (It's worth remembering that the Jewish priesthood bore very little resemblance to Christian priesthood: it was an hereditary office whose main purpose was to take turns in carrying out the daily sacrifices in the Temple). It is a sobering commentary on those who have a leadership role in religion today. Over the centuries and the Church has never lacked so-called leaders, clerical or lay, whose behaviour has been disgraceful. Did the priesthood of Malachi's day consider that they were betraying the essence of their religion? Probably not: most of us are quite capable of justifying our behaviour on the highest principles, and we can be very upset when an outsider tells us how they evaluate what we are doing.

**Second Reading I Thessalonians 2:7-9, 13** - Paul beautifully expresses his maternal side in today's reading. Like a mother nurturing her offspring so the child will grow up big and strong, so Paul says he laboured over his Gentile converts in Thessaloniki. Although he accepted financial support from the community in Philippi, he reminds the Christians in Thessaloniki that he and his companions worked overtime so as not to be a burden on them (Paul was by trade a tentmaker, providing essential equipment for the travellers of his day). But his efforts were rewarded by the stunning response of the baby Christian community in the city.

**Gospel Matthew 23: 1-12** - In the Jewish religion of Matthew's time there were two guides as to correct worship and proper behaviour. There was the Torah, the five books of the Bible that provided the written basis for the Law. And then there were the increasing number of rabbinic teachings and opinions. Every detail of daily life fell under some or other instruction, to the detriment of those who vainly attempted to be faithful to what they were told was the way to honour God. Those who taught all this naturally assumed prominent places in society, after all, it was their due, was it not, in all humility, to be in charge of other people's moral behaviour? Matthew's Gospel was written for a Jewish Christian community that based its life on the traditions of Jewish Law and customs (they weren't entirely convinced that gentiles could become Christians without obeying those traditions) and the writer wanted to demonstrate how Jesus – who is presented very much as a teaching rabbi - understood the ideal of the Law, emphasising the ideal of the Law rather than its letter. Jesus' criticism of the elaborate dress, love of ritual and expectation of reverence due to the rabbis of his day is not without relevance in our time.

## **12th November THE THIRTY SECOND SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME**

**First Reading Wisdom 6:12-16** - Divine Wisdom is given a feminine personality, subtle rather than blustering, but easily recognised by those who seek her, giving to humans the qualities they need to rightly lead their lives. The town gates were traditionally the places where the town's elders congregated to consider the important matters of the day. The role of Wisdom was to give guidance, to make people fully adult, "well rounded," we might say today; and as God's emissary she was not passive, but was actively looking for those who would respond to her call. We see here the earliest development of a way of thinking about God that will lead eventually our understanding of the Holy Spirit. Loving Mum rather than Dove.

**Second Reading I Thessalonians 4: 13-18** - Among the Pharisees, a belief had grown up that the souls of the dead rested with God and that prayers could be offered on their behalf. Other groups, such as the

Sadducees, retained the earlier belief that after death there was only Sheol, the place of insubstantial ghosts, similar to the pagan Hades, the Underworld (Note: this is the word unfortunately translated as “Hell” in the Apostles’ Creed. *He descended into the underworld* is based on a non-scriptural belief that Christ went to liberate the souls of the just who were awaiting redemption through his sacrifice). The teaching of Paul, that Jesus died and rose again and that his followers would share in his glorious life would have transformed the lives of the pagan converts in Thessaloniki. But at this early stage in Christianity the belief was that the Second Coming of Christ in glory (the posh word is the Parousia) would not be long delayed, and some were speculating about how this would be for those who had already died. Paul tried to reassure his readers that those who had already died won't miss out!

**Gospel Matthew 25:1-13-** This is more of an allegory than a parable, about the Parousia referred to in today’s second reading. The bridesmaids (virgins in the original Greek) represent the members of the Church awaiting the coming of Christ in glory. Their anticipation meets with some disappointment, nothing seems to be happening- and then the shout goes up! The lamps the girls carry represent their lives and the oil their good deeds. It isn't unkind of the five wise virgins to refuse to share their oil – one can't transfer the merit of one's actions to someone else. The wedding feast represents the finally and fully achieved Kingdom of Heaven but just because you are one of Christ's followers doesn't give you an automatic ticket into Heaven, says Matthew.

### **19th November THE THIRTY THIRD SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME**

**First Reading Proverbs 31:10-13,30-31** - At our Sunday Masses there is always a link between the first reading and the Gospel. Sometimes it needs a stretch of the imagination to see what that link is: and today’s extract from the Book of Proverbs is a case in point. The book is a collection of traditional sayings, some going back to very ancient times but given a religious twist. So, the perfect woman is the one who always makes best use of her resources; the perfect servant is the one who uses his master’s wealth to best advantage for the master. Women's importance in Israelite society was “behind the scenes”. The elders might gather at the city gates to discuss matters of high politics and parish pump, but if they praised their wives, the ladies weren't there to take the credit. The ideal wife, according to this portrait, was one who knew how to manage the household affairs, able to spin and sew, give a helping hand to the deserving poor. Not for her dalliance with the paints and potions on the dressing table! It is only too easy to imagine her husband sitting back in his chair in the evening sunshine and boasting of what a find she has proved to be. Male chauvinism reigns!

### **Second Reading I Thessalonians 5:1-6**

In last Sunday's gospel the Second Coming was pictured in terms of the preparation for a marriage. Paul's imagery here is more foreboding: Christ's coming will be like an unexpected midnight burglary or a woman's sudden labour pains. As the Church's year draws to a close we are constantly reminded that there will be an end to things: don't know where, don't know when but it's surely going to happen one day! Maybe we have shunted ideas about the end of the world to some far off fantasy time, more suitable for science-fiction than faith, but the lesson here for each one of us there will be a personal revelation of Christ's glory.

**Gospel Matthew 25: 14-30** - Matthew has built an original parable (see Mark 4:24) into an elaborate lesson for his community. Originally a talent was a standard measure of weight: here it represents a gigantic amount of money. The master absents himself, leaving three servants to look after his wealth, each according to his ability. Two apply themselves but the third decides to keep what he's been entrusted with and give it back no less no more. He is condemned because he didn't make use of what he was given. Interestingly, this story seems to favour gaining interest on a deposit, something forbidden in traditional Jewish thinking. This is a many layered story but the basic message is that the Good News is something that should transform the lives of the members of the community, something to be shared with others.

## **26th November THE FEAST OF CHRIST THE UNIVERSAL KING**

**First Reading Ezekiel 34:11-12, 15-17** - Even today in this country shepherding is an arduous job, in times of blizzard or flood, at lambing, ensuring the safety of the sheep from rustlers. In Israel, although real shepherds were regarded as being on the margins of society (which is why Luke uses them in his story of the nativity), the king, following on from the kingship of the shepherd David, was always regarded as being the shepherd of his people, responsible for their well-being. Ezekiel's declaration the Lord God would make *himself* the shepherd of his Chosen People must have resounded at a time when the political leadership was failing, and the country was menaced by foreign invaders. But the Kingship of God also implies a sorting out of the good and the bad, the sheep from the goats. Which is why this passage was chosen to accompany the Gospel reading.

**Second Reading I Corinthians 15:20-26, 28** - Envisaging the Parousia, the Second Coming of Christ in Glory, Paul draws on the story of Adam. We have to remember that Paul would have thought of Adam as being a real person, the first human being, the Garden of Eden as being a real pleasure park (the original meaning of "Paradise"). But even accepting the story of Creation as being a religious interpretation of the relationship between humans and God, the story still holds good. Though "Adam's sin" (Eve's originally, in the story) infected humanity, Christ's redemption brought a greater gift. Paul pictures the work of Christ as not yet complete, there are dark forces to be overcome until everything is under his authority. At the present time, as in all ages past, the thoughtful person must sometimes lament just how far from perfection the world is. But remember the Jewish proverb: better to light a single candle than curse the dark. What Paul meant by the ultimate subjection of the Son to God is difficult to interpret: the doctrine of the Trinity that we take for granted as a Christian fundamental was not properly developed in Paul's time.

**Gospel Matthew 25:31-46** Matthew imagines Jesus as sitting in judgement in the day of final judgement. Sheep and goats were useful images for the good and the bad: sheep tend to be pacific, do as they are told, goats are wilful, wandering about, eating things they shouldn't. In the judgement the sheep are bewildered to be told that they have done all these things for Jesus. They've never seen him; how could they have done such things for him? And conversely, how could the goats be blamed for not doing good to Jesus? The message is alarmingly simple: to do good to others, especially those in need, is to recognise Christ in our neighbour. Simple message, sometimes hard to put into practice!