

6th April Fifth Sunday of Lent

First Reading: Isaiah 43: 16-21 This reading is a song of hope and joy and rejoicing on the return from Exile (fifty years in what is now Iraq for a significant proportion of the population, a couple of generations in those days). The sad past it put behind, a new life welcomed. Isaiah pictures God speaking to the people he rescued from the hands of the Egyptians in ancient time. Now the return from the Exile in Babylon is like a fresh Exodus, from slavery a straight path through the wilderness in which God will provide water for his chosen people to drink. Water is a significant scriptural reference: at the beginning of the Creation story God's Spirit breathes over the formless waters; in the psalms the person seeking God is like a deer searching for streams of living water; water protected the Israelites and destroyed their enemies in their escape from Egypt. They passed through Jordan's waters to reach the Promised Land: and it was in the water of that river Jesus was baptised by John.

Second Reading: Philippians 3:8-14 In his letter Paul was warning the community in Philippi to beware of those Christians who insisted that non-Jewish converts must adopt Jewishness, circumcision and the observances of the Law. He could speak with authority because his own background as an orthodox Pharisee. In today's extract he says he has moved on from all that. Now all that counts in his life is knowing Jesus Christ. But this acknowledgement of the Lord is a challenge. He sees life as a race with the prize still to come. The trials of life become a sharing in the sufferings of Christ. Faith is God's gift to us, and it is faith that activates our lives as Christians.

Gospel: John 8:1-11 So far this year we have been reading from Luke but now we turn to John's Gospel. The community from which this Gospel emerged portrayed Jesus very differently than the three Synoptic Gospels. Here Jesus is seen as a stately figure, engaging in long discourses in which he reveals his true inner self and purpose. In today's reading Jesus has come to the area in the Temple area where the religious experts could lecture and discuss points of the Law. Today's topic is adultery, for which the Law prescribed the death penalty it's a technical point really because at the time such a penalty could not have been authorised by a Jewish court). People of the Pharisee party bring along one they claim has been caught in the very act. It takes two to tango but, curiously, they've only caught the woman. What's the verdict of this controversial teacher? It is anyone's guess as to what Jesus was writing in the dust (it has been popularly suggested he was itemising the sins of the accusers). Then he gives his interpretation of the Law. Yes, legally, she stands condemned. But there's a catch: a little matter of personal sinfulness being an obstacle: not an argument in Law, rather an appeal to moral sensibility, and by the time the righteous gang have made their excuses and left, the woman stands alone before Jesus, whose admonition is simply "Don't sin again." It's difficult to know what might have been the exact historical origins but it offers a clear teaching about the fundamental essence of Jesus' teaching.

13th April Palm Sunday

There was an ancient Jewish belief that the conquering Messiah King would enter his city in a triumphant procession

Gospel at the blessing of the palms: Luke 19:28-40 - Luke's gospel concentrates on Jerusalem as being the ultimate goal of Jesus' mission. Now is the time for a piece of drama. Jesus is about to enter the Holy City, the seat of the Almighty, coming in peace, on a donkey not a war horse. Matthew's account refers to two animals in consequence of a misunderstanding of Zechariah 9:9, which refers to the saviour entering Jerusalem on *a donkey, the foal of a donkey* – a poetic Hebrew description of a single animal. Here Luke's version contains an echo of this by describing the animal as an unriden colt – not the easiest of animals to mount! The account of the entry into the city has deliberate definite overtones of the triumphant entry of the Ark of the Covenant into Jerusalem in the reign of King David. The sting in the drama is hinted at in the last sentence of the gospel reading.

The Mass

First Reading: Isaiah 50:4-7 - Five so-called Songs of the Servant of YHWH (the sacred name of God that must never be pronounced aloud) are interspersed in the latter part of the book of Isaiah. The identity of this Servant has been constantly argued about, but the Christians from earliest times have liked to see them as prophetic of the mission of Jesus and this, the third of these Songs, must surely have influenced the way the Gospel writers described the sufferings of Jesus at the hands of his executioners.

Second Reading: Philippians 2:6-11 - This is an early Christian hymn of praise (we have no way of knowing whether it was composed by Paul), to the One who became as we are, who suffered and died and who was exalted by the Father above all creation. We might compare this to the Gloria that we recite most Sundays of the year (except in Lent!).

Gospel Luke: 22:14-23:56 - Luke presents the Passover Supper as the Eucharist, the act of thanksgiving, which is to be the centre of life in the Christian community until its perfection at the second coming at the end of time. Luke weaves a sense of foreboding into the narrative: though the apostles are promised judgement seats in the kingdom, one of his chosen is to betray him. Simon is warned of his weakness and his protestations meet with a bleak foretelling of denial. The followers of Christ must prepare themselves to survive in a hostile world, which is the sense of the reference to back-packs and weapons. Luke pictures Jesus in his hour of anguish Jesus deserted by "judges of Israel" - their "sleep" being a sort of refuge from reality. Identified by Judas with a kiss of friendship, Jesus demonstrates his rejection of violence. Peter's denial of Jesus is told in a way that strikes us as totally plausible – we may well have a sense that we have been there ourselves in one way or another - and the tearful realisation of his betrayal is poignant. While the accusations against him in the Sanhedrin are religious, the plot becomes political as soon as he is brought before Pilate. For the Romans, revolution in an ethnically diverse sprawling empire was greatly to be feared, and the little corner of the empire that was Palestine was notorious for its unrest. Pilate finds an excuse to bounce Jesus back to Herod, from whose jurisdiction he originates, and Luke notes that this game between the two rulers brings them into a new friendship – the powers of the state united in opposition to the Christ. The irony of the crowd preferring Barabbas to Jesus highlights human fickleness, though this Passover custom is not known about from any other source. Simon, from the North African city of Cyrene, is spoken of as though he might be remembered by the Christian community at the time Luke was writing. There was a Jewish tradition that pious women made a point of offering drink to condemned criminals, though here Luke weaves this into Jesus' warning of the total destruction of the city and the Temple that was to come in only a few years' time. Luke makes a point of recording Jesus' prayer for forgiveness of his executioners and the reply to his fellow sufferer that "today you will be with me in Paradise",

surely one of the most consoling sentences ever spoken. The rending of the veil protecting the inner Sanctuary of the Temple symbolises God's departure from his throne: the Temple is no longer the seat of God on Earth. In keeping with Luke's intention of making the story of Jesus acceptable to non-Jews, it is a Roman army officer in charge of the execution whose words set a seal on the terrible event. Our reading ends with the brave approach made by Joseph of Arimathea and the preparations made by Jesus' women followers to carry out the burial rituals as soon as the Sabbath was over.

17th April HOLY THURSDAY

First Reading: Exodus 12:1-8, 11-14 - The historic background to the Jewish Passover was an offering - either of sheep or goat - made by nomadic herdsmen. This became linked to an agricultural festival of unleavened bread, first fruits of the harvest, made by settled farmers, the two becoming combined to celebrate the liberation of the Israelites from slavery. It was in the context of this annual celebration that Jesus gathered his disciples and gave them the new Passover, the celebration of liberation from sin and reconciliation with God

Second Reading: I Corinthians 11:23-26 - The dissensions among the community of believers in Corinth were made manifest in what was supposed to be their communal celebration of the Lord's Supper. This worship had not yet evolved into the formal ritual we are familiar: with it really was a meal: the well-off who could afford to bring good food were neglecting the needs of the poor among them. There was nothing to congratulate them for such behaviour. By way of contrast, Paul repeats what he had taught them about the Lord's Supper. The letter, written years before any of the Gospels, represents the earliest understanding of the Eucharist.

Gospel: John 13:1-15 -

If John's Gospel were the only New Testament document we possessed, our Sunday celebration might centre upon the celebrant washing the feet of the congregation! Washing the feet of the guests was a task undertaken by a slave. When Peter protests he is told bluntly that to refuse to allow Jesus to perform this task is to cut himself off from all that Jesus is and stands for. John's gospel is a deep reflection on the significance of Jesus' acts and words. In Luke's account, Jesus asks who is the greater, the one who eats at table or the one who serves, and goes on to describe himself as being among them as a servant. John's gospel puts these words into dramatic action. It is a stark rejection of the climate of deference that was to grow to dominate the Church.

18th April GOOD FRIDAY LITURGY

First Reading Isaiah 52:53 - 53:12 - Was the author of this part of the book intending to describe the so-called "Remnant of Israel" - a name given to those faithful few who through all their sufferings never abandoned the Lord God? In the Old Testament Israel is sometimes personified as "The Servant of God". However, in Christian tradition the Songs have from earliest times as an illustration of the mission of Christ, and it is as a meditation on his sufferings and the vindication of his resurrection that the text is offered to us today.

Second Reading: Hebrews 4:14-16; 5:7-9 - The unknown author of the letter, writing to a community of Christians from a Jewish priestly background, makes use of their familiarity with the Temple worship. The High Priest was the only person authorised to enter the inner sanctuary of the Temple once a year to make sacrifice in atonement for the sins of himself and the people (commemorated as Yom Kippur in modern Judaism). In Jesus, Son of God, this letter says, we have the supreme high priest, who in his humanity has shared our condition. Today's reading is a cobbling together of separate verses from the letter and you should read the whole passage to better appreciate the richness of the thoughts expressed.

Gospel: John 18:1-19, 42 - In Jewish thought the name was all-important because it revealed the true identity of the person. This is Jesus – Yeshua in Hebrew, meaning “God is salvation”. “I am he” reminds us of God’s revelation to Moses in the story of the burning bush. It was “I am” (the sacred name YHWH never to be pronounced) who sent Moses to deliver the Israelites. Caiaphas’ pragmatic advice, worthy of a cynical lawyer or politician, becomes an echo of the “scapegoat” – the animal symbolically laden with the sins of the people and driven out into the desert. Peter’s denial is rendered in such acute detail that we can almost hear the crowing of the cock. John’s emphasis on the participation of the mob in the trial before Pilate is in line with his reference to the antagonism of the “Jews” elsewhere in this gospel and lays John's Gospel open to the charge of being one of the major sources of anti-semitism in Christian Europe. Too complex an issue to go into in detail here but it is worth remembering that by the time this Gospel was written there had been a decisive break between mainstream Judaism and the new offshoot that was to become Christianity. Thereafter there was no love lost between the increasingly gentile Christian body and traditional Jewish communities. Perhaps the most charitable interpretation of John’s use of the term “Jew” would be “those people who had no time for Jesus and wished him ill”. The mob is a dangerous beast and easily manipulated. The man Pilate is being invited to judicially murder is “King of the Jews”. In Hebrew, the word *king* is “Messiah, the “Anointed One”, which in the Greek that the gospel writer used is “Christos”. The expectation about the Messiah was of a king who would lead his people to freedom as Moses had led the people out of Egypt, a David who would make the nation mighty. But this king doesn’t lay claim to a realm in earthly terms he's talking about a whole different world of freedom. Pilate, in refusing to alter the placard nailed to the cross, unwittingly plays the prophet. John has the dying Jesus placing his mother in the care of the “loving disciple”. This detail, unique to this Gospel, poses a question as to its significance - a community tracing its origins to the "Beloved Disciple" having a special understanding of the mother of the Messiah?

19th April THE EASTER VIGIL

In the early centuries of the Church the annual commemoration of the passion and triumph of the Christ became to focal point for the baptism of adult converts. After forty days of intense preparation an evocative midnight ritual traced the story of God's plan for his people, reaching back to the beginning of time. It is poetry not history in our sense of the word: Eden is a love story with God, the Promise to Abraham, the slavery and rescue of the Israelites from Egypt, are all mythical interpretations of the people's history in search of God and His gradual self-revelation that culminates in Christ.

First Reading: Genesis 1:1 –2:2 - The teaching here is that the whole of creation owes its origin to the will of God expressed in his enabling “Word”, which immediately reminds us of the opening of John’s Gospel which deliberately introduces the mission of Jesus as the beginning of a new creation. The creation story is fitted into the framework of a week, to correspond with the Jewish religious division of time: as God rested from his labours on the seventh day, so too must faithful Israel.

Second Reading: Genesis 22:1-18 -

The story of Abraham’s attempt to obey God’s demand by the sacrifice his only son Isaac. probably contains a warning that the Israelites were not to imitate the practice of child sacrifice that was practised amongst their neighbours. The first-born male had great significance in the ancient world – we might remember the story of the tenth plague of Egypt. It was the Jewish custom to dedicate the first-born male child to God (we read in Luke’s Gospel how his parents made offering for Jesus in the Temple). Perhaps the reason for the inclusion of this passage in the Easter vigil readings it to foreshadow Jesus’s self sacrifice

Third Reading: Exodus 14:15 – 15:1 - Water has both negative and positive symbolism and nowhere is this demonstrated better than in the account of the flight of the Israelites and the destruction of the pursuing army. The way through the water brought life for some, death for others. Whatever the precise historical origins of this story, the drama is gripping and the message abundantly clear: it is the Lord who is the Saviour of his people.

Fourth Reading: Isaiah 54:5-14 - The consolation of Israel after the Exile. The unfaithful people were abandoned by God for a while but he takes them back in pity because God can't relinquish his creation, his people, "my love for you will never leave you" and their future will be glorious. In historical fact the high hopes on the return from Exile were never realised and the people's hopes turned to the prophetic promises of a future saviour who would "restore the kingdom to Israel".

Fifth Reading: Isaiah 55:1-11 - This follows on from the previous reading. The vision of life in the new dispensation has so many overtones for us: the water turned into wine at Cana, the feeding of the five thousand, the promise of the true bread from heaven. The disciples of Jesus will be witnesses to the whole world.

Sixth Reading: Baruch 3:9-15, 32-4:4 - Not part of the Hebrew Bible, the book of Baruch appears to be a compilation from various sources. The passage we are reading here may come from the second or first century BC. The people are rebuked for their lack of fidelity, they have become like the dead ("Sheol" is the shadowy underworld, a place of insubstantial shadows). If they had only kept faith they would have learned true wisdom. In such later biblical writings as these, Wisdom – true knowledge - was personified as working out God's plans in the world. The author seems to be saying that true knowledge resides in a proper understanding and obedience to the Law, but there is also a reaching for an appreciation of the creative Holy Spirit of God.

Seventh Reading: Ezekiel 36:16-17(a), 18-28 - This offers a brief resumé of the Exile and the return as a vindication of the holiness of God. It is perhaps the closing sentences that resonate most strongly with us: the promise to give a new heart and spirit, taking away the "heart of stone".

Romans:6:3-11 - In the early days of the Church, baptism was the culmination of the forty days of final preparation which we have come to know as Lent. This extract from Paul's letter to the Christian community in Rome is a powerful explanation of what baptism means for us: a death and a resurrection to a new kind of life. The symbolism is all the more powerful if we remember that baptism in the early Church was always by total immersion.

Gospel: Luke 24:1-12 - The Jewish Sabbath ended at sunrise so the women are free to go to the tomb to perform the burial rituals that had previously been ignored. There is no body to anoint but they are reminded by the visionary guardians of what they had been told before. Each of the gospels has a different description of this event, but all are agreed the women were the first to make the discovery of the empty tomb. Luke respects the place of Peter by making him the one to verify the women's testimony. Typical male chauvinism!

20th April EASTER SUNDAY

First Reading: Acts 10:34,37-43 - Peter's declaration is a sort of first Creed, recounted by an eye witness. The reality of what he tells Cornelius is reinforced by the reference to eating and drinking with the Risen Lord (ghosts don't eat!). Cornelius is not Jewish but he is what was known as a "God fearer", a gentile who admired the Jewish religion. The followers of Jesus, all Jewish, were at first doubtful about admitting such people into their company – an orthodox Jew would never share food and drink with a gentile for fear of being offered food it wasn't proper to eat.

Second Reading: Colossians 3:1-4 - The Christian community is reminded by Paul that the new life they have been given in baptism involves a total re-orientation of the principles by which they lead their lives.

Gospel: John 20:1-9 - Contrary to popular belief (possibly by a sixth century misunderstanding of her description in Luke's Gospel as the woman from whom seven devils had been driven out) Mary of Magdala was not a prostitute. In this Gospel Mary was the first witness of the reality of the Resurrection: Mary first, and then Peter. Notice how Peter, as the leader despite his previous denial of Jesus, is given pride of place by the "disciple Jesus loved". In a male orientated world, the significance of women has been mostly subjugated to an auxiliary role, useful assistants to the primary male dominance - mostly because of reluctance to accept Saint Paul's understanding that in Christ there is no male or female, we are all equal as brothers and sisters in Christ.

27th April SECOND SUNDAY OF EASTER (Divine Mercy)

First Reading: Acts 5:12-16 - At this stage there is no question of the followers of Jesus forming a body distinct from the worshipping community of Judaism. The good news they had to announce was the fulfilment of Jewish hopes and longings about their relationship with God. The disciples meet in the covered walkway along the eastern wall in the Court of the Gentiles, the outer court of Herod's Temple, possibly the same area described in Luke's Gospel as the place where the young Jesus was discovered with the doctors of the law. We might think of it as a sort of "open university" or theological college).

Second Reading: Apocalypse 1:9-13,17-19 - *Apocalypse* is a transliteration of the Greek word for "revelation". The extraordinarily symbolism used in the document has been a source of all sorts of fantastic religious speculation but it is in fact in the line of a popular style of Jewish writing in the two centuries before Christ. The Essenes of Qumran also made use of this style of writing. The author identifies himself as "John" and was understood by many early writers to be the Apostle John. However, for several centuries not everyone accepted the book as part of the canon of inspired writings and today it is generally accepted as being the product of the school of John's disciples, probably written around the end of the first century. The writer has been exiled to the Roman penal colony on the island of Patmos in the Aegean Sea. It is here that he has a vision of Jesus as the Messianic Judge, dressed in the long robe, symbolising his priesthood, and golden girdle identifying his kingship.

Gospel: John 20:19-31 - The Risen Lord commissions his disciples, filled with the Spirit, to proclaim the Good News. The vivid description of Thomas' confession must have been salutary for all those followers who envied the first disciples and is easy enough for us today to identify with him and with the closing words of John's Gospel (chapter 21 is a later addition) that declare the whole purpose of the work: - to reveal to us the truth about Jesus.