

SUNDAY NOTES 5TH JULY PENTECOST 5

Zechariah 9.9-12

Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem! Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey. He will cut off the chariot from Ephraim and the warhorse from Jerusalem; and the battle-bow shall be cut off, and he shall command peace to the nations; his dominion shall be from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth. As for you also, because of the blood of my covenant with you, I will set your prisoners free from the waterless pit. Return to your stronghold, O prisoners of hope; today I declare that I will restore to you double.

Romans 8.9-13

But you are not in the flesh; you are in the Spirit, since the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. But if Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you.

So then, brothers and sisters, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh— for if you live according to the flesh, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live.

Matthew 11.16-19, 25-30

‘But to what will I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the market-places and calling to one another, “We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not mourn.”

For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, “He has a demon”; the Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, “Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax-collectors and sinners!” Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds.’

At that time Jesus said, ‘I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. All things have been handed over to me by my Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.

‘Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.’

Introduction

At times life can become very burdensome far less the unprecedented pressure caused by the pandemic. We have a clear and open invitation from Jesus to come to him with our burdens and he offers us rest. Not a literal rest from our burdens but a peace of mind that comes from a trust in the providence of the Almighty.

Old Testament Reading

The prophet Zechariah joyfully announces that the long hoped-for Messiah king is to come to his people. Quite unlike the tribal expectations of the time, Zechariah has this Messiah be a humble and gentle leader and not the warrior king who will lead them in military conquest of the other tribes. On the contrary, this new king is to bring peace and put an end to war. This is the quality that Isaiah spoke of in chapter 11 at verses 1 to 9 in his prophecy. It is inevitable that the modern reader, with the benefit of the New Testament gospels, would think of Jesus entering Jerusalem not on his war chariot like some Roman

general but on the humble donkey. This is the Jesus who was to usher in the peace that the world cannot give.

Epistle

The letter to the Romans is a very dense and complex epistle to unravel. St Paul is not noted for a pithy linguistic style. In English translation, his sentences are long and dense and do not make for easy reading. Nonetheless, the letter to the Romans is worth the effort. In this extract Paul is trying to get his readers to understand that there is a very great difference between life 'in the spirit' and life 'in the flesh'. 'Flesh', in this sense, means human beings in all their glorious frailty and transience. This is to be contrasted with the 'spirit' which is the power of God to act as the leavening which will mean the difference between spiritual life or death.

Gospel

The first section of the Gospel contains the prayer which Jesus utters thanking His Father that He has hidden the mysteries of the kingdom from all the learned and wise (that is, the religious experts of the day) and transferred that wisdom to be uttered from the mouths of babes and innocents, so to speak. The childlike, as far as Jesus was concerned, were the disciples. This is a celebration of the unique relationship Jesus enjoyed with the Father, a relationship that the Son makes possible for those who believe in him. The second section, containing the noteworthy phrase about taking up one's yoke, is often misunderstood. Some have taken it to mean that people are stuck with whatever life throws at them and must accept the inequalities that lead to the poverty of life chances. This is not what is intended by Jesus. On the contrary, the image of the yoke was carefully chosen. The listeners would think of the phrase often uttered by their rabbis that they were to take upon themselves the yoke of the Jewish Law. As we know, this burden had become intolerable because of the complexity of the rabbi-made additions to the Torah. In contrast, Jesus was saying that his yoke only demanded that the person love God and neighbour. This invitation was specifically addressed to those both burdened and wearied. Some people receive more invitation than others in life. Everyone feels weary sooner or later. Jesus offers the weary a yoke. This is not meant to be the last straw that breaks a person. Rather, it means that the person is taken into the care of Jesus because instead of the yoke chaffing the neck of the person it is, on the contrary, a perfect fit.

12th JULY PENTECOST 6

Isaiah 55.10-13

Romans 8.18-23

Matthew 13.1-9,18-23

Introduction

The readings have a botanical feel to them. Jesus, for example, compared the word of God to a seed. If the seed is to bear fruit it must be sown in favourable ground. The “ground” is a metaphor for the human heart but unfortunately our hearts are not always receptive. We need the Lord to watch our hearts so that they can receive the word.

Old Testament

The prophet emphasises the care that God has for the created order. It is He that also sends His word so that we might be cared for. The rain always produces positive results in some part of the globe and in like manner the soul responds and becomes fruitful. God is quietly persistent in His sowing of the word until a response is given.

Epistle

St Paul’s argument is based on his understanding that the created world has been spoiled by Adam’s sin of disobedience. It will be physically restored, he argues, from its decay when the believing Christian’s expectation of the fulfilment of God’s promise of the resurrection of the body is brought to pass at the second coming of Christ. Paul believes that the glory that awaits us in the next life far outweighs anything we could suffer in this life. Let this not become an excuse for apathy and inaction when it involves the social inequalities that blight the life of so many.

Gospel

Spread across several Sunday readings, St Matthew brings together eight parables which illustrate various aspects of the kingdom. The chapter opens with the parable of the sower and its interpretation. Between the parable and its interpretation Matthew inserts material to explain why Jesus speaks in parables. This parable suffers from familiarity breeding contempt. It is too easy to miss its true import. Parables were, in effect, riddles meant to lodge in the mind of the hearer but, more than that, to tease and provoke a response. This particular story might be better understood as the “parable of the soils”. The same seed was used but the different locations of the soil produced different results. The early Church adapted this parable to the new situation in which it found itself. The explanation given by Jesus reflects the missionary experience of the early Church and accounts for the relative failure of the message of Jesus. Four obstacles have frustrated the growth of the kingdom: the shallow mind, the hard heart, worldly preoccupations, and persecution. So it was then, so it is now.

19th JULY PENTECOST 7

Wisdom 12. 13,16-19

Romans 8.24-27

13.24-30, 36-45

Matthew

Introduction

We go to Church, not because we think we are saints, but because we know we fall noticeably short of perfection. Thankfully, we have a Lord who is always patient with us and always ready to receive what we can give. He never abandons us but calls us back to the right path.

Old Testament

It is very unusual for the lectionary to prescribe a reading from the Apocryphal Books of the Old Testament. The lectionary offers an alternative reading from Isaiah but we will use the reading from the Book of the Wisdom of Solomon. The extract points out that God's attitude towards his creatures is fundamentally one of care. Though God has both the knowledge and the power to root out evil people if He so desired, He is patient in the face of human wickedness and gives people the chance to repent. This should all serve as a blueprint for our dealings with one another. Mercy and leniency towards our brothers and sisters are an expression not of weakness but of strength.

Epistle

In this short extract St Paul is talking of prayer and it is a profound form of prayer he means. The Holy Spirit helps us to pray when we are at a loss to find the words we need to express what is in our mind. Many of us find prayer tedious or downright difficult. Despair not. The Holy Spirit comes to the rescue.

Gospel

Jesus parable of the wheat and seeds originally addressed the problem of sinners in the kingdom. The Pharisees believed that the Kingdom was for saints only. Sinners should be ruthlessly and absolutely weeded out. Jesus attempted a different approach. The seed was good seed, so the farmer's workers were surprised to find there were weeds growing along with the wheat. However, living in an age before pesticides, they would have recognised the good sense in waiting until the harvest and then they could separate the wheat and the weeds. As usual, the disciples do not get the meaning of this parable and want an explanation. In essence, what Jesus is trying to teach them is that up to the last judgement, the kingdom will be a decidedly mixed bag of saints and sinners. Over the centuries the Church has not been good at living this truth. It is not for the modern Church to play God by attempting to purify itself through the modern-day equivalent of purges and inquisitions. The definitive separation of the good and the evil-ones (if that indeed is what happens) must be left to the future judgement of God. Meanwhile we live with the messiness.

26th JULY PENTECOST 8

1 Kings 3.5,7-12

Romans 8.28-30

Matthew 13.31-33,44-52

Introduction

This Sunday's liturgy is dominated by the theme of wisdom. This is used as a biblical concept to mean God's way of thinking, so to speak. This is not worldly wisdom. The Greek word for wisdom is *sophia*. Notice that, grammatically speaking, it is a feminine ending and thus there is a long standing tradition that when wisdom (as in the Wisdom literature of the Old Testament) is mentioned it has a feminine dimension in describing the work of God. Whether masculine or feminine, God communicates to us the meaning of our life. The Old Testament reading and the Gospel are especially linked by this theme.

Old Testament

The youthful Solomon has only just been chosen to succeed David as king. Solomon did not feel he was able to meet all the challenges that would present themselves as he took up his destiny. God intervenes in a dream and offers him a choice of any gift he might wish. Neither wealth nor power was his heart's desire but what he craved was "wisdom". In a strange paradoxical way, it was wisdom he applied to realise that he needed wisdom! What an amazing insight. Most of us would have responded in a predictable way craving all the 'good' things of life. God rejoices in the choice Solomon makes and promises wisdom in abundance. Notice, however, it did not prevent Solomon from making bad choices after he became king. Just because a person is given a gift from God it does not turn that person into a religious automaton because free will is still there as the person makes choices for good or for ill.

Epistle

St Paul argues that God turns everything to the spiritual advantage of those who love Him. There has been a desire by some commentators to use these verses to support an argument that God exercises a form of predestination. Predestination is a wicked notion and destroys any possibility of free will. On the contrary, what God desires is that we should be 'conformed to the image of His Son' and thereby share in his glory. For that to happen we need to cooperate with the promptings of the Almighty. Verse 29 (i.e. 'he (God's Son) might be the firstborn' employs the Greek word *prototokos* – 'firstborn' – means one having the first position, status and authority; in other words, the one at the head of that new body of redeemed, adopted, children of God.

Gospel

This week the Gospel continues the theme of using parables to impart "wisdom". The parables of Jesus do not appear in a uniform fashion. Some were complex stories with several dramatic characters. Others are no more than one-liners or mere observations. No matter their linguistic complexity or otherwise, their import was to teach his hearers about how God wishes to interact with His creation. The first section of today's extract deals with the mustard seed and yeast. Jesus was stating that the mustard seed was understood in his day to be the smallest of all the seeds. Of course, modern botany tells us that the smallest of all the seeds is the orchid. Jesus is trying to get the point across that God works from the smallest to the largest. God, in His wisdom, chooses to use the weak and the smallest to advance the Kingdom. Equally with yeast, we need to wait and see what arises, so to speak. God's kingdom is to be all-pervasive acting like the leavening in the dough to produce the sought-for outcome. Although yeast looks like a minor ingredient, it permeates the whole loaf. Although the kingdom began small and was nearly invisible, it would grow and have a great impact upon the world.

The second part of today's extract presents us with no less than three parables – 'hidden treasures'; the pearl; and, the fishing net. The 'hidden treasure' points to the fact that the kingdom of heaven is more valuable than anything else we can possess, and we are to give up everything to obtain it. In a similar vein, the man who discovered the treasure in the field stumbled across it, but he knew the value when he found it. Equally, the merchant was on the look-out for the fabled pearl of great value. When he found it, he sold everything he had to purchase it. The fishing net referred to was a large dragnet used in new testament times slung between two boats to catch large quantities of fish, in contrast to the smaller casting net used

by individuals. This parable has the same message as that of the wheat and the weeds. In other words, in its present stage the kingdom contains both good and bad things. Only at the final judgement will they be separated. The extract finishes with a summary parable of the householder and the new and old treasure. Those who have understood these parables will be like a wise scribe (back to wisdom!) who understands the new revelation in Jesus and the old revelation in Moses. They need each other for the light they shed upon each other. However, the new revelation is now definitive as it is truly the fulfilment of the old.