

Sunday By Sunday

Our Regular Guide to the Word Of God in the Sunday Liturgy
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SECOND SUNDAY AFTER CHRISTMAS

04.01.04 Jn 1,1-18

1. The evangelist's magnificent vision of the 'Word made Flesh' (Jn 1, 14) comes through contemplation of the Divine Mystery, who is Jesus. Having made a home for Mary in his own house (cf. Jn 19, 27), it is hardly surprising that the cosmic significance of the Virgin birth achieves its full impact in the Prologue to John's own gospel. Christ Jesus, who is eternally begotten of the Father, is begotten in time of the Holy Spirit, and takes on our own flesh and blood "not out of human stock, or urge of the flesh, or will of man, but of God" (Jn 1, 13). Salvation is born of Mary's co-operation.

2. Heaven meets earth in the 'fiat' of the Virgin of Nazareth. Because she has dared to say 'yes' to God, the heir of the Ages can enter his inheritance, and we can be saved. St Bernard captures the drama of that moment of decision: " Answer, O Virgin, answer the angel speedily; rather, through the angel, answer your Lord. Speak the word and receive the Word; offer what is yours, and conceive what is of God; give what is temporal, and embrace what is eternal " (Bernard of Clairvaux, Homilies in Praise of the Virgin Mother, no. 4). Mary's assent enables John to see the glory of the Word, 'full of grace and truth' (Jn 1, 14).

3. Our Lady brings to birth Jesus in the hearts of all believers, even that of St. John. In obedience to the Father, by the power of the Holy Spirit, the Word is made flesh in the lives of all faithful Christians as Mary intercedes for the Church. It was impossible for us to know God fully without Our Lady's co-operation in helping bring about the Incarnation. So it is impossible for us to know God fully now without honouring the Divine Mother. She is not an optional extra because the flesh of Jesus is not an optional extra.

THE EPIPHANY OF THE LORD

06.01.04 Mt 2, 1-12

1. Gold denotes a king, frankincense the presence of God, and myrrh the need for burial. Right from the birth and first 'shining forth' of the Christ child to the Three Kings, there is a forewarning of the Passion and death of Jesus. The oldest accounts in all four gospels are the Passion narratives, even in the briefer version preferred by Mark (Mk 14-15). Matthew and Luke both witness to the earliest teachings of the Church, seeing an intrinsic link between the birth and death of the Messiah (cf. Mt 2, 11; Lk 2, 34). There can be no salvation without redemption, no resurrection without the cross.

2. Herod broods like a dark

shadow (Mt 2, 3) amidst the light of the shining star and the delight of the three Wise Men (Mt 2, 10-11). He represents the forces of evil and damaged human nature within our world. Providence allowed the travellers from the East to stop at Herod's palace - for Our Lord has come that sinners may repent. Even Herod is given the chance to turn from evil and welcome the new-born king. His cunning is matched only by his savagery when thwarted of his ambition to destroy this rival from Bethlehem (Mt 2, 16-18). In this also is the shadow of Cross for Jesus.³ But God's plan of salvation cannot be withstood or challenged, even by one such as Herod. Nothing can dim the joy of the Wise Men, nor dim the bright shining of the star. All can see this cosmic annunciation of the coming of the Messiah, just as salvation in Jesus will reach to the four corners of the earth and every second of recorded time. This feast is about the arrival of the Heir of all Ages among his own. It is a Mystery both sublime and humble, which embraces the whole universe in the arms of a tiny child.

THE BAPTISM OF THE LORD: C

11.01.04 Lk 3, 15-16.21-22

1. Luke's account is very much the gospel of Jesus at prayer (cf. Lk 4, 42; 9, 18; 11, 1). The baptism of John was only a type of baptism, of which the baptism of Jesus is the archetype. Image gave way to reality, and Luke is concerned to make a clear distinction between John's baptism of water and that of John's divine cousin, Jesus, with the Holy Spirit and fire. Only after the baptism of John does the Holy Spirit descend on the Messiah, and then as the fruit of Jesus' own prayerful communion with the Father (Lk 3, 21), and not as a direct result of the baptism of John.² John's baptism signifies a desire for repentance and conversion of life. Jesus' baptism makes that desire a reality through forgiveness of sins and an outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Only God can forgive sins, so only the baptism of Jesus eradicates sin and heals our fallen human nature from within. The baptism of fire spoken of by Luke is surely the purifying action of the Spirit throughout our lives, making effective in every day things those baptismal graces won for us by Jesus. By fire we are made light and warm, but also purified and tempered in the Christian life.³ Cleansing from the stain of Original Sin in those who accept Jesus through baptism makes salvation possible for us. It draws us to follow in the footsteps of the Master, even to accepting crosses God's will allows us in this life. Grace must evoke a response for good or ill, because no-one can be neutral to God. To have received baptism is to have received the grace of faith. This must be nurtured through instruction and example, lest rejection of God in the lifestyle of the baptized set up an internal dichotomy that is the opposite to communion with God.

SECOND SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME: C

18.01.04 Jn 2, 1-11

1. There is a three-fold dynamic in John's sacramental theology. He works signs for all to see, so that seeing we may believe, and that believing we may have life within us. This is eternal life - a light shining in the dark "that darkness could not overpower" (Jn 1, 5). Thus, salvation for John is not 'pie in the sky when you die'. It is a power in the heart of the believer here and now - the essence and attraction of Jesus (cf. Jn 4, 1-42) as pure gift to those who will accept him. It is also the driving force behind the fourth Evangelist's contemplative vision.2. "He let his glory be seen, and his disciples believed in him" (Jn 2, 11). At this most homely and every-day type of occasion, salvation begins to seep into the fabric of this world. He who through whom all things were made (cf. Jn 1, 2), and in whom all things are sustained, began to draw his last and dearest creation - man - into the very life of the godhead. It is a staggering claim. Either Jesus is a total madman or he is God. Yet the very sobriety of John's simple statement that the disciples believed in him gently insists - the Word has indeed been made flesh (cf. Jn 1, 14).3. Mary is the principal guest at the Wedding Feast of Cana, with Jesus and his disciples invited in a secondary capacity. If this were the launch of a new product like a computer programme or a fizzy drink, the marketing directors would be tearing their hair out. This would not be thought the way to force the product into the forefront of the consumer mind, which needs to be manipulated by every trick of an all-powerful media. But God's way is not man's way (cf. 1Sam 16, 7). Salvation is of God, a truth deeper and a life fuller than any adman dare contemplate.

THIRD SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME: C

25.01.04 Lk 1, 1-4; 4, 14-21

1. Grace perfects through human nature. So God, in revealing himself to human beings, respects human ways of doing things. He loves his creation and honours the work of his own hands. Thus the Son enters human history - into a religion and culture that has been prepared to receive him, into a family context which is vital and formative of his maturing humanity. But this background and social environment is not an end in itself, necessary though it is. It is only a springboard for the Good News; that God has entered in among us to fulfil, feed and strengthen us.

2. No doubt all who heard Jesus that day in Nazareth knew him from boyhood, knew his context and family, but they did not realize who he really was. Challenged and encouraged to accept him as the Messiah - the anointed one of God - his fellow townsfolk will react with incredulity and downright fury. They will try to kill him (Lk 4, 28-30). Worldly reputation and human praise are exposed

as blind guides within a few short verse (cf. Lk 4, 15). The words that Jesus utters are human, but their message is supernatural. They are meant to make us change, to convert us to new life in God.

3. Joy characterizes the teaching of Jesus. Human pride cannot chain up the word of God, nor effect any part of its substance. It can mock, resist and try to distort, but it can never triumph. The year of the favour of the Lord has indeed arrived. Good news will reach the ears of the poor, liberty will be proclaimed to captives, the blind will be given new sight and the downtrodden set free. We need to remember this when we celebrate our faith as Catholics, even if at times we meet scorn and derision like our divine Master.

FOURTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME: C

01.02.04 Lk 4, 21-30

1. Jesus works miracles to show forth his divinity, and to elicit faith among those who witness his actions. Faith is needed, whether weak or strong, so that forgiveness, healing and salvation may enter the soul of the believer (cf. Lk 5, 20; 7, 48; 17, 19). For a gift to be given, it needs to be properly received. For Jesus, this means faith, and not the mere fact that those to whom he preaches are his kinsman. “ Physician heal yourself ” (Lk 4, 23) quoted here is no more than a cynical attempt to manipulate the local carpenter for the sake of civic pride. Nazareth cares only to keep up with Capernaum.2. Jesus sees that not only do the Nazarenes not listen, but they never will. Their stubbornness amazes him, and he assures them that merely being from the same place will not suffice for the kingdom of God. He challenges their narrowness by referring to Scripture, convicting them from the very source they claim to hold sacred (Lk 4, 25-27). Murderous rage among Jesus’ kinsmen comes as a sinful reaction to the touch of the divine in the human soul - a touch seeking to enter that space in us where we are intimate with God and called to submit to the divine will.3. Providence rules our destinies, so Jesus slips through the crowd and walks away because his hour has not yet come (Lk 4, 30). The locals see only the carpenter, but the creative hand through whom the universe and each one of them was shaped is in their presence. The brow on which Nazareth was built is still visible and easy to see on entering the town. It is strange to think of such a holy Christian shrine associated with such an extreme level of rejection. Little wonder, then, that the Saviour sought the empty places where his teaching could achieve full impact.

FIFTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME: C

08.02.04 Lk 5, 1-11

1. "Put out into deep water" (Lk 5, 4). Pope John-Paul's call to the young people of the Church at the 2000 World Youth Day in Rome echoes these words of Christ to Peter. In the new millennium we are to put our trust in God alone, unafraid to take the gospel message into our own hearts and to witness boldly to the perennial truth, who is Jesus. The Pope's appeal to young people lies in a reluctance to patronize them, and in a reluctance to alter or compromise one iota of the Apostolic Faith handed down to us. Joyfully he preaches the truth.2. Like his Vicar on earth at Tor Vergata to more than two million people, in this gospel Jesus teaches the crowd from the barque of Peter. From the shallow lakeside waters in Galilee, people are fed by his teaching in a way never experienced before. With authority he brought saving truth into their lives. Then comes the command to put out into the deep. This is too much for Peter, tired and dispirited from a whole night's futile effort in his fishing boat. He must have been indignant at this Rabbi requisitioning his vessel, yet moved by Jesus' words.3. Jesus provokes Peter to tell him what is troubling his heart. Perhaps this angry fisherman has heard just enough of what the Lord has preached to be touched. Although reluctantly, he does obey the command of the Rabbi. His life is changed forever. Not just the miraculous draught of fish, but the divine power at work in Jesus singles Peter out for special service. If we could open our own hearts just a little to the Lord, then we too could be transformed. A spark of generosity ignites a divine fire in us that fits us for heavenly service.

SIXTH WEEK IN ORDINARY TIME: C

15.02.04 Lk 6, 17. 20-26

1. The Lord hears the cry of the poor. Thus, he turns conventional Jewish wisdom on its head: riches being always considered a sign of God's blessing, and poverty a token of his displeasure or curse. But Jesus' message is not social revolution for its own sake. Rather, his concerns are rooted in establishing the Kingdom of God on earth: "Happy are you when people hate you, drive you out, abuse you, denounce your name as criminal, on account of the Son of Man" (Lk 6, 22). It is because of Jesus that all this will happen to you. Only he can make it a blessing.2. Riches often prove a barrier to the love of God. They become a cushion giving false autonomy and superficial stability. They can desensitize the richman to the distressing face of God in those who are rejected and suffering through want of basic necessities. Jesus is not anti-laughter or anti-consolation (cf. Lk 6, 24-26). He is against an assertion of self which distorts or even substitutes the image of God in man and in society. Directly opposed to this selfishness is the Kingdom of God based on the love of God made known in Jesus - a love which exposes and then transforms poverty of heart.3. Luke's treatment of the Beatitudes takes on the aspect of a covenant with the poor. Curses were an integral part of the process of ancient Israelite covenant (cf. Josh 24, 1ff), regulating the behaviour of the parties concerned by defining

unacceptable actions and attitudes. Stating the negative accentuates the positive, like a dark frame surrounding a light canvas. Here, poverty means openness to the justice of God in line with the experience of all the faithful prophets. Riches become an end in themselves, promoting injustice to preserve a shaky status quo. False prophets mask greed and injustice with a veneer of fidelity to God.

SEVENTH WEEK IN ORDINARY TIME: C

22.02.04 Lk 6, 27-38

1. "You shall not kill" (Ex 20, 13). Jesus fills in the positive side of this negative commandment as he preaches the law of the New Covenant. It is not good enough merely to refrain from killing your enemy; you must love him too: "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who treat you badly" (Lk 6, 27-28) Jesus' words seem a divine madness and entirely contrary to human nature. They are contrary only to a human nature deeply distorted by the lesion of sin. In the original plan of God, they are our fulfilment and hope.2. "If you love those who love you, what thanks can you expect?" (Lk 6, 33). God's grace transforms human nature, fitting us for heaven through the forgiveness of our sins, and fulfilling that capacity in us by God's free gift to share the divine nature (cf. 2 Pet 1, 4). In Jesus, we are called beyond our unaided natural capacity to a higher standard and deeper perfection. There can be no compromise in the demands of the New Law of Christ, because they come to us from the mouth of one like us in all things but sin. Perfect humanity draws us into divine love and charity.3. "Be compassionate as your Father is compassionate. Do not judge, and you will not be judged yourselves.." (Lk 6, 36). In fact, Jesus' instructions to us are not hard, even if they are insistent. We must measure our own behaviour towards others against that which we would like to receive ourselves. We must also realize that harshness dealt out to our neighbour is harshness received by ourselves at the hands of God in the Final Judgement. God's judging is not unjust because the measure of mercy lies with us. We decide our eternal destiny through the choices we make before God and man.

FIRST SUNDAY OF LENT: C

29.02.04 Lk 4, 1-13

1. The Devil tempts Jesus all through his time alone in the desert, but saves his most deceitful malice until after Jesus has been through his fast, and can be expected to be at his weakest physically. The first trial assails him through his

appetites. After his lengthy fast, the Lord may eat legitimately without breaking any vow to God. Satan uses this licit desire to try and ensnare his prey. Jesus' reply exposes his adversary's empty cunning, because he admits his own hunger whilst refusing to be a slave to it: "Man does not live on bread alone" (Lk 4, 4).2. Fasting for sinful human beings finds its heart in fasting from evil. It can never be an end in itself, or else such a practice becomes an extremely harmful snare. Preferably with the blessing of a spiritual director and as a fruit and accompaniment to intense prayer, fasting seeks to train the gaze heavenward to a nourishment beyond words from our Father in heaven. It also recognizes the disorder in our good and God-given passions due to sin, and sees in self denial a laudable way to attack deep rooted pride in human willing. One who fasts learns to love.

3. The order of Christ's second and third temptations is inverted in Luke's account, as opposed to that of Matthew (cf. Lk 4, 9-13; Mt 4, 5-11). This is thought traditionally to be because of Luke's emphasis on the central importance of Jerusalem in both Lucan works - Gospel as well as Acts. Thus, Jesus is taken to the parapet of the Jerusalem Temple in Luke after having been tempted with all the kingdoms of the world (Lk 4, 9ff). Jerusalem is the city of David, and therefore the city of the Messiah. It is the dwelling place of the living God, and the place where salvation in Jesus spreads throughout mankind.