

Sunday By Sunday

Our regular guide to the Word of God in the Sunday Liturgy

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14TH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME: A

3.7.05 Mt 11, 25-30

1. Children at primary school rarely guess why the priest wears a 'Y' pattern embroidered on his chasuble at Mass. Some suggest it is a cross, but virtually none guess it's a yoke. Yokes and ploughs are not symbols of a computer age, but the richness of this imagery is nevertheless striking. In every pair of oxen ploughing, there is a lead ox which bears the brunt of the toil and a following ox which supports the efforts of its stronger colleague. Jesus is saying, "Let me be your lead ox. I will do the work, and in my company you will find rest amidst the toil".

2. Jesus knows our difficulties and the things that weigh us down. He is with us to lift us up and give us heart when our courage fails. All we need is the humility to know our need of God and the grace to turn to him in our hour of need. We live in a world of pseudo self-sufficiency and arrogance, where the ability and willingness to destroy lives under the guise of sound economy is often a key measure of success. Our Lord shows us another way - the way of charity which alone satisfies the human heart.

3. Elsewhere in Matthew's gospel, the meek are promised the earth for their inheritance (Mt 5, 4). In this gospel, the Good News of the Lord of heaven and earth is revealed and accepted by mere children in stark contrast to the learned and the clever. Humility comes from the Latin word for earth ('humus') and is the virtue by which we keep both feet on the ground. It is only people such as this who breathe in the sweet and wholesome air of the gospel of life. Only when we begin to inhabit a self-centred world of our own making does the air grow stale.

15TH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME: A

10.7.05 Mt 13, 1-23

1. "...now a hundredfold, now sixty, now thirty" (Mt 13, 23). Why this law of diminishing returns for those winning souls for the kingdom of God? Is there some tacit warning here about growth ending in decline? Surely not. Matthew the Jewish evangelist is merely emphasizing utter gratuity in the gifts God showers on us. The work is the Lord's and the victory is his (cf. Judg 7, 2). What is it to man if God grant him a hundredfold increase or ten? Since without God's grace

and the gift of the Holy Spirit nothing could be achieved, there is no room for vain pride and human boasting here.

2. St. Augustine saw faith continually seeking understanding. The Christian journey is a voyage of discovery until we put in at the harbour of paradise. Our hearts and minds are restless until they rest in God. It is easy to see the basis of this doctrine in this parable, where the key element distinguishing the man who produces solid fruit from the one who falls victim to the devil is understanding. Both men could have attended the same church regularly, heard the same sermons and the same teaching. But where one opened his mind and heart, the other did not.

3. Jesus takes up the mantle of Isaiah as he preaches using difficult images. A modern spin doctor might advise the Lord to simplify the message and ask if he might edit the Master's speeches. But Jesus is fulfilling the shocking vocation of Isaiah to "Go and say to this people, 'Hear and hear again, but do not understand; see and see again but do not perceive'" (Is 6, 9). Jesus is well aware of the hardness of our hearts, but also of our capacity to be drawn up into the divine. Only those that persevere in his service will bring in the kingdom.

SIXTEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME: A

17.7.05 Mt 13, 24-43

1. Jesus refers to the devil as a person throughout the gospels. He is the father of lies and a murderer from the start in whom there is no truth at all (Jn 8, 44). Once a society lady went to confession to Padre Pio, saying that she didn't believe in the devil. Her confessor simply replied, " You will". Our Lord assures us that Satan is active in the world and that the sin he engenders is real. But Christ's whole ministry demonstrated his absolute power over unclean spirits and the deceiving influence of the devil. In Jesus we triumph.

2. Satan is the sower of darnel among good seed (Mt 13, 39). No word is ever without meaning in a parable, so the alarm of the owner's servants can be seen as the alarm of the angels at the distortions brought about in man through the malice of the Evil One. " Was it not good seed that you sowed in your field?" (Mt 13, 27). Was not man made in the image and likeness of God, a creature of beauty given a divine vocation? (cf. Gen 1, 28; 2 Pet 1, 4). Just as the wheat is not destroyed by the darnel, so human nature is not destroyed by original sin.

3. God chooses the weak and makes them strong. His power is always at its greatest in human weakness. Thus the mustard seed, which is the smallest of all the seeds turns into the biggest shrub of all, giving shelter to the birds of the air in its splendid branches. The kingdom of God has the humblest of origins in the manger at Bethlehem, but grows in the power of the Holy Spirit into the

worldwide Church, where fallen humanity can find healing and shelter in its many branches. The work is God's, not man's. We are mere servants.

17TH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME: A

24.7.05 Mt 13, 44-52

1. "Every scribe who becomes a disciple of the kingdom of heaven is like a householder who brings out from his storeroom things both new and old" (Mt 13, 52). A classic text beautifully describing the intimate and vital relationship between Old and New Testaments, Matthew seeks to show his Jewish audience clearly how their religion is fulfilled in the coming of the Messiah in the person of Jesus Christ. More than any other evangelist, Matthew draws heavily on the Jewish scriptures and often assumes a familiarity with the Law and Prophets in his account of the life and ministry of Jesus (cf. Mt 12, 15ff; 5, 20-48)

2. Breaking the intrinsic link between the Old and New Testaments was among the first of the early Christian heresies, attributed to Marcion. He rejected the Jewish writings in favour of preferred texts in the New Testament, so that his religion reflected more his own tastes than the revelation of the Word of God. If we see no value in the Old Testament and fail to read it in the light of the New, especially by altering the Easter Vigil, for instance, then we radically fail to understand the gospel. It would be better for us to be sons and daughters of Jesus Christ than followers of Marcion.

3. These quick-fire similies wash over our heads because we have no time to contemplate them. They are similar, but by no means the same, and we struggle to fathom them. The kingdom of heaven is of more value than the deepest of buried treasure or the most perfect of fine pearls. But it is also as commonplace as drab fish hauled in by the dragnet. There is a sense that this struggle is the same for the disciples, whose "Yes" to Jesus (Mt 13, 51) is anything but decisive. Like children who nod to please the Master, they proclaim an understanding they lack.

EIGHTEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME: A

31.7.05 Mt 14,13-21

1. Jesus' generosity amidst tiredness and grieving humbles us, leaving an example to follow. Any priest knows the tiredness resulting from demands in parish life, with the temptation to say, 'No'. Jesus does not do this, despite agonizing grief at the passing of John the Baptist, further exacerbated by the grueling toil of his outdoor ministry. He does not seek to do his own will, but the will of the Father in providing for the hungry sheep. Our Lord teaches them at

length, satisfying their thirsting souls and giving them the solid doctrine entrusted to him by his Father.

2. The miracle of the loaves and fishes reveals to an unsuspecting world the depths of God's provision for his people. In giving bread to the hungry, Jesus satisfies human needs with generous charity, but he also hints at a meaning beyond the immediate. How will he heal the sick in future generations, teach them solid doctrine and live among them? Through the Church he founded on Peter and the Eucharist he instituted hours before his death. In this way his real presence will be perpetuated just as the five loaves and two fish became abundant food filling twelve baskets full of scraps.

3. Jesus' action in taking the five loaves and two fish, raising his eyes to heaven and saying the blessing, before breaking bread and handing it to the disciples, echoes the words of institution reported later (Mt 26, 26). Although Matthew does not recall Jesus raising his eyes to heaven at the Last Supper, this gesture of prayer and supplication is contained within the blessing recorded. Jesus is our High Priest, offering prayer and the sacrifice of the cross on behalf of all people. He needs to make no offering for his own sin, since his sinless perfection is its own all-powerful plea on our behalf.

NINETEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME: A

7.8.05 Mt 14, 22-37

1. One of the last scenes in the recent 'Lord of the Rings' film echoed the dramatic gesture of Jesus in putting out his hand and holding the floundering Peter. As the fellowship of the ring breaks up, Frodo seeks to escape in a boat, only to be pursued by his faithful servant, Sam, who leaps into the water despite the fact that he cannot swim. As Sam sinks, a strong, Christ-like hand grabs him and prevents his drowning as Frodo hails him into the boat. Tolkien's Frodo bears many of the hallmarks of the Messiah who must tread a stony path for the salvation of all people.

2. Peter's impetuosity is brave but short-lived. He is in an unprecedented and alarming situation, which he tries to deal with by clinging to the love he has for the Rabbi who has taken him from his nets on a pioneering journey of faith. But the man on the ground seems to bear little real resemblance to the apparition which has paralyzed his colleagues with fear and set his own teeth on edge. Peter is all heart and no strength. No-one can meet the divine Son on these terms without grace in the form of an outstretched hand.

3. Though Peter's doubts began to arise as he took his eyes off the Master and began to contemplate the fury of the crashing waves, the identity of the Messiah is never in doubt. In his terror at sinking, Peter still cries out, "Lord, save" (Mt 14,

30). Jesus is Lord throughout Matthew's gospel, and his divinity is never in doubt. Thus his ability to save is assured, and Peter has only to make his desperate plea and salvation is accomplished. The word, "at once" is key here as Matthew reminds his persecuted Jewish audience that Jesus is not slow to act, but needs us to remain steadfast in the faith.

SOLEMNITY OF THE ASSUMPTION

14.8.02 Lk 1, 39-56

1. " Great Mother of God, so wondrously united with Jesus Christ, from all eternity, by the same decree of providence; in her conception immaculate, in her divine motherhood a virgin most pure, the noble associate of our redeemer in his victory over sin and its consequences - what reward awaited her at last? For the crown of all her graces, she was exempted from the sentence of decay; shared her Son's victory over death, and was carried up to heaven, soul and body, there to reign as queen at his right hand, who is the King of Ages, the immortal " (Apostolic Constitution of Pope Pius XII on the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary).

2. Pius XII wrote with passionate intensity about the privileges accorded to the Mother of God at her Assumption. In doing so, he was not being controversial. He was responding to the enormous ground swell of Catholic opinion throughout the world that asked him to declare on this matter. The Pope underpinned the essential realism and physicality of the Catholic Faith by developing the logic of St. Paul's teaching to the Corinthians: " Christ is the first fruits and then, after the coming of Christ, those who belong to him" (1Cor 15, 23). No-one belonged to him more closely than Mary of Nazareth, his mother.

3. Jesus really rose in his physical body and ascended into heaven. His mother did the same, through the merits of her Son. He who walked the earth for thirty-three years also walked it after his death in the same physical body, though risen and glorified. The Church has never defined whether Mary died, but we know that in the same body through which she gave birth to the Messiah, she was taken up to heaven and there continues her ministry of drawing all to her Son, Jesus. Our vocation is to follow Jesus and Mary. Therein lies our hope.

TWENTY-FIRST SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME: A

21.8.05 Mt 16, 13-20

1. Mark's gospel sees Jesus constantly telling his disciples and even unclean spirits to remain silent about who he is (cf. Mk 8, 30; 1, 26). Commonly understood to be a reflection of the evangelist's theology that only on the cross is

Jesus' identity fully known and the Messianic secret revealed (Mk 15, 39), this device is rarely used in Matthew's gospel, where Jesus is always the Messiah openly, often addressed as 'Lord' (cf. Mt 8, 25). Matthew has a different editorial purpose to outline the miracles and teachings of the Messiah as openly as possible. He is appealing to a principally Jewish audience anxious to know the basis of Jesus' Messianic claims.

2. So why the secrecy in this key passage, exclusive in its rich detail to Matthew? (cf. Mt 16, 20). It may well be because Simon has not yet completed his transformation into Peter. Though his faith has sparked into flame, it is still immature and all too susceptible to the cold winds of persecution. Jesus knows that Peter will betray him (Mt 26, 69-75) and utters words and promises that will only be fully understood in the light of his own resurrection and Peter's re-birth as Prince of the Apostles through the gift and regeneration of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. Then will he proclaim Christ.

3. Grace perfects through human nature. Simon was an impetuous and often irritable fisherman, whereas Peter becomes the head of the Church, willing ultimately to give glory to God by his martyrdom at the Circus of Domitian in Rome around 64 AD. We can all take courage from Peter and be inspired by his example and determination. No situation is too difficult for the grace of the Holy Spirit, if only we stick close to Jesus as Peter did, not giving in to a sense of despair that our own sinfulness can engender within us. Self-reliance is the enemy of God's grace.

TWENTY-SECOND SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME: A

28.8.05 Mt 16, 21-27

1. Jesus draws on the Wisdom literature of Israel, bringing it to fulfillment in the power of his cross. For a thousand years the Sages of Israel had sought to instill principles of right conduct in every day living. For the man who leads astray there is no excuse: " Will you object, 'But look, we did not know'? Has he who weighs the heart no understanding, he who scans your soul no knowledge? He himself will repay a man as his deeds deserve" (Pv 24, 12) Sirach too advises his son that the Lord will repay, " each as his deeds deserve and human actions as their intentions merit " (Sir 35, 22)

2. Thus when Jesus says that the Son of Man, " will reward each one according to his behaviour " (Mt 16, 27) he is merely echoing the inspired wisdom of the ancients of his people. Where he is radical is in apportioning this heavenly task to himself as the anointed of God, the one who was to come, the Messiah. None of this would have been lost on the disciples, who would have heard the teaching of the Wise Men each week in the synagogue. Only in the light of the resurrection

do they fully understand the claims of Jesus. Here Matthew makes the connection.

3. Correct behaviour is this: “ If anyone wants to be a follower of mine, let him renounce himself and take up his cross and follow me ” (Mt 16, 24). Peter is scandalized that the anointed of God could associate himself with cursed death by crucifixion. He places himself between Christ and the cross the Father wishes his Son to bear. Instantly, from being “ a happy man ” (Mt 16, 17) Peter becomes “ an obstacle in my path ” (Mt 16, 23) as Jesus rounds on him as one who would see the kingdom of God in this-worldly terms, like Satan (Mt 4, 8-9). But Jesus’ victory will echo in heaven as well as on earth.