

Sunday By Sunday

Our regular guide to the Word of God in the Sunday Liturgy
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6TH SUNDAY OF EASTER: A

01.05.05 Jn 14, 15-21

1. Jesus' words about his own leaving them create a growing sense of sadness in the Apostles, who have grown to depend on their Master during three years of toil and travel. Struggling with such feelings must have exhausted them so that they were quite unable to pray with Jesus later on that evening in Gethsemane (cf. Jn 18, 1; Lk 22, 45-46) The Master has so much to tell them with so little time left. A constant sinister undercurrent during these discourses is the impending betrayal of Judas who has slipped out into the night with words of truth ringing in his ears but a darker purpose in his heart (cf. Jn 13, 27-30).

2. The one who loves Jesus is the one who keeps his commandments (Jn 14, 15.21). Not by words or good intentions, easy promises or empty resolutions do we prove our love for the Lord. Only when we are living the sort of life that Jesus led in obedience to the Father under the guidance of the Spirit can we be sure that we truly have love within us. Again, the subtext of betrayal gives a deeply poignant edge to this teaching. Position and eminence close to the heart of the Church offer no guarantee whatever. Even Judas was one of the twelve.

3. "...he is with you, he is in you" (Jn 14, 17). The Advocate whom the Father will send on the Apostles at the request of the Son continues the work that Jesus has started. He is "another" Advocate (Jn 14, 16) implying that the work he does is the same work as the Son. He is also a counselor, protector, comforter and helper - all of which can be understood from the Greek 'parakletos'. Our Lord promises that this Spirit of Truth will be with us in the sense of being at our house ("apud" in Latin), not merely in the sense of being in our company.

FEAST OF THE ASCENSION: A

05.05.05 Mt 28, 16-20

1. The divinity of Jesus is never in doubt in Matthew. The title 'Lord' is used many times (Mt 8, 25; 14, 28.30) and there is an emphasis on authority throughout the gospel (Mt 28, 18; 7, 28-29; 9, 8). Yet we learn here that even at the end some

of the apostles hesitated to believe in him. What more could Jesus have done for them that he did not do? There are echoes here of the ingratitude of Good Friday in the strange, almost irrational reluctance of those closest to Jesus to recognize him and believe the evidence of their eyes. At least the apostles do fall down before their Lord. Eventually.

2. Jesus' love reaches out to us in his infinite patience. Though he had previously criticized his apostles for their doubt (Mt 8, 26; 14, 31), here he makes allowances and encourages the eleven in their newly-dawning Easter faith by his physical appearance and inspiring words. Our Lord's victory is quiet as silence but all-pervasive. Like the light of the sun which spreads to every corner of the globe, the joy of Easter glory suffuses through every generation until the end of time. Even when we hesitate, the patience of Jesus waits with unbounded love for our reluctant knees to bend before him and acknowledge the Lord.

3. Is Jesus with us or not? At the Ascension he is taken into heaven in his physical body, passing from our sight. We can be tempted to flounder. Like doubting Thomas, we can ask, " Lord, we do not know where you are going, so how can we know the way?" (Jn 14, 5). Jesus' real presence has passed into the sacraments of the Church, physically so in the Holy Eucharist. He has kept his word, remaining an abiding presence for us in the tabernacles of our churches. The Ascension is the power behind Jesus' injunction to Thomas, "Doubt no longer, but believe" (Jn 20, 27)

7TH SUNDAY OF EASTER: A

08.05.05 Jn 17, 1-11

1. "Father, the hour has come.." (Jn 17, 1). John's gospel is split into two sections, with Jesus' public life and miracles forming the first twelve chapters, and the last few days of his earthly life and subsequent resurrection forming the last nine. These last chapters are subtitled, 'the book of glory' because they outline the coming of the hour of Jesus when he died on the cross as the innocent lamb sacrificed for us. Many times Jesus is preserved from harm because his 'hour' had not come. With Judas gone and Calvary beckoning, Our Lord announces that his time has now come.

2. It is upon the cross that the Christ is king and fount of God's glory for fallen man. This was the same glory that the Son had with the Father before time began (Jn 1, 1). Sin as a power to enthrall men is quite overthrown in its very attempt to bring down the glory of God through the ignominious death of the cross. John shows that the cross becomes the throne of God's glory where the universal kingship of Christ restores all men to health and allows them to know for sure that same glory of God.

3. Jesus knows that his disciples love him, that they accept his teaching. In acknowledging this, he prays especially for them so that they might be made strong enough for the work he has to give them in bringing the love of God into a hostile world. They are to be the foundation stones of the Church, the vehicles of abiding truth and the swords of the Spirit. In their priesthood, they are conformed to the Master, whose single sacrifice they must perpetuate and imitate, even to the shedding of their own blood. They need this prayer.

FEAST OF PENTECOST: A

15.05.05 Jn 20, 19-23

1. The risen body of Jesus is truly physical and yet transformed. John is at great pains to emphasize both continuity and discontinuity between the risen Christ and the Christ executed upon the cross. There is something different about Jesus after the resurrection, yet he is unmistakably the same physical and spiritual reality as before death. When the evangelist remarks that “the doors were closed in the room where the disciples were, for fear of the Jews” (Jn 20, 19) he suggests that the terrified followers of Jesus had barricaded themselves in. Yet the same Jesus and no ghost comes and stands among them.

2. Jesus bestows peace upon his disciples. He says it twice: once to establish his credentials as a flesh and blood human being, and once as the grounds for the gifts and mission he wishes to confer on the disciples. The Hebrew sense of this word is multi-faceted and rich. Our Lord is not talking about the modern notion of an absence of war, but a deeper and more positive blessing. He brings soundness, welfare, security, prosperity, tranquility, contentment and friendship. In the primary sense of the word ‘shalom’, Jesus brings completeness. This completeness is gifted us through the Holy Spirit.

3. ‘Shalom’ or completeness is the fruit of a perfect fidelity to the Covenant made by God with Israel. The blessings God promised Abraham if his descendants were faithful to the promises made them has now been won in fullness for the Church by Jesus, who establishes the new Covenant in his own blood. Peace in the Hebrew sense can only come through perfect response to God’s holy Covenant and conformity to the Law. No man ever achieved this except Jesus. He was the perfect Jew in response to the election and mission given him by his Father.

FEAST OF THE TRINITY: A

22.05.05 Jn 3, 16-18

1. A few years ago now, during the 1986 World Cup played in Mexico, advertising boards appeared around the grounds which departed from the usual marketing hype. Instead of the latest beer, bank or razor blades football fans were challenged by a single biblical reference: 'John 3: 16'. The temptation to look it up proved too much even for some of the hardest hearts. Secretly, many old bibles were dusted down to reveal a reference to the gospel in just one verse. Jesus came into the world to reveal the Father's love, who is the Holy Spirit made known through Jesus.

2. Belief in John's gospel is the key notion. Do we believe what Jesus says? Do we believe that he came from the Father, whom he reveals to us. That certainty of faith that comes to us once we have encountered the living Lord is the gift of the Holy Spirit. Jesus reveals to us that God's love for us is not something static or remote, but a share in the creative dynamism of Father, Son and Holy Spirit through an utterly unmerited and free act of giving. The Father wishes us to have life and have it to the full.

3. Nicodemus often gets a bad press as the disciple who only half-loved Jesus by night. But there is sufficient evidence of the courage of this man both before and after the death of Jesus (Jn 7, 50f; 19, 39). He is a slow and deliberate man, but there is evidence that he got there in the end. Jesus gently mocks his ultra caution (Jn 3, 10) but respects his need to understand before committing himself. Indeed, he draws out of Jesus some of the most profound and succinct summaries of the gospel. Not exclusive and condemnatory like the Pharisees, Jesus has come into the world to save all.

FEAST OF CORPUS CHRISTI: A

26.05.05 Jn 6, 51-58

1. If Jesus had wanted to give us his physical flesh to eat and his physical blood to drink, could he have put it more plainly? The reaction of his audience to this shocking teaching gives a clear indication that they understood his words and intention to be wholly literal. Neither did Jesus attempt to allay their horror at his words or to act as a sop to their deep sense of scandal. The crowd turn against him (not for the last time) and walk away. These were not people who had been previously hostile to the Master. All this changed.

2. The Church insists on the use of the term 'transubstantiation' to describe the change that comes about in the elements at Mass. She insists that the whole substance of bread becomes the whole substance of the body of Christ, and that the whole substance of the wine becomes the whole substance of the blood of Christ. The elements retain the appearance of bread and wine, but what they are in themselves has changed into the physical body and blood of the Saviour through means of the words of consecration pronounced by a validly ordained Catholic priest.

3. Why should this be so? The answer is to feed us and sustain us in our Christian life. Jesus said that he would not leave us as orphans (Jn 14, 18), and he kept his promise in the most marvelous way through the Eucharist. We need to be fed by him as a child needs to be sustained by its mother's milk. There is no cannibalism here because we are not eating dead flesh, but rather the living flesh of the Word who dwells among us. This feast is about the unique physical presence of God among us, drawing us to a deeper life in him

NINTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME: A

29.05.05 Mt 7, 21-27

1. Because faith is seen as something essentially irrational in our modern secular age, a massive gap has been allowed to develop between what a man believes and how he acts. Faith is insubstantial and lacking in mental grip or relevance, whereas how one acts must be dictated by real considerations such as economics, scientific advancement and government intervention. Jesus' words cut across such easy-sounding, self-serving cant as he insists on the essential connection between listening to the truth he speaks and acting on it. It is this that separates the sensible man from the stupid, not political correctness.

2. Jesus assures us that if we do not act on his commandments, we are heading for a mighty crash. Grand external appearances, much success and popular acclaim can hide shallow roots. In such circumstances the bigger we are, the harder we fall. Jesus' words give life. They have to be the rocky foundation that sustains our being, upon which we build up the sure house of a sound character and mature personality. Between the house built on sand and the house built on rock there is no fence to sit on. We choose one or the other.

3. It is easy to fool oneself, and Our Lord assures us that many will do just that. His words are shocking, but they are nothing compared to the fright many will receive on Judgment Day who hear them with complacency and enthusiastic lip-service. We can take from God gifts of prophecy, power over unclean spirits and even the ability to work miracles and attribute it all to our essential worthiness and sheer ability. We are not judged on how we sculpt our speeches and

witticisms, but on the charity we show to the poor and neglected, the marginalized and uncool.

TENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME: A

05.06.05 Mt 9,9-13

1. One of the reasons Jesus transferred his Galilean ministry from Nazareth, his home town, to Capernaum was that the latter was a busy frontier town. Nazareth was an inland backwater, but Capernaum boasted a garrison to keep order and a customs house to regulate trade. The synagogue in the town was a magnificent structure beyond the norm for the area. It had been built by the Roman centurion whose faith had astounded Jesus and whose words are recalled at Mass: "Lord, I am not worthy..." (Lk 7, 1-10). Taxes in Capernaum were extorted beyond the going rate by collectors more hated than the Romans themselves.

2. Caravaggio's painting of the Calling of Matthew conveys all the drama of this extraordinary event. Jesus and Matthew are worlds apart and occupy each side of the canvas, with Matthew in the gloomy shadows and the beckoning Jesus in the natural light of the doorway. Matthew is not even looking at Jesus, so absorbed is he in counting money. If Jesus had had an image consultant or spin doctor, they would have left his company immediately. No cause could survive the trauma of being associated with a tax collector, but Jesus knows what he is about and stares straight at the unsuspecting Matthew.

3. Not spin doctor, but sin doctor. Jesus no more approves of what Matthew does than anyone else. In calling the tax collector to follow him, he is drawing him to a new way of life: "It is not the healthy who need the doctor, but the sick" (Mt 9, 12). Jesus sits at table with sinners. In doing this he exposes the spiritual pride of the religious elite, not in any overtly humiliating way but in the form of an invitation to abandon the isolation of the higher moral ground for a better way: "What I want is mercy, not sacrifice" (Ho 6, 6 quoted in Mt 9, 13).

ELEVENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME: A

12.06.05 Mt 9, 36 - 10, 8

1. Like Moses, whose care of the people of Israel proved too great a task for him alone (Ex 17, 13-26), Jesus sees the enormity of the work that confronts him. But, whereas Moses was in danger of being crushed by his labours, Jesus' heart overflows with compassion for his flock. There is no sense of weakness on Jesus' part in Matthew's account of the commissioning of the apostles. Rather, it

is a response of overwhelming love and zeal for the task in hand. Jesus' love for the dejected townsfolk who flock to him causes him to share his labours. Such sharing continues to this day.

2. Authority and power exude from Christ. A key concept in this gospel, there is none of the sense of isolation and abandonment in Matthew's treatment of Jesus that can be detected in Mark's corresponding account of Jesus' public ministry. Jesus is always in control in Matthew's writing, and his is very much the gospel of apostolic service. The work of the Church is paramount, and much of the central sections of the gospel are concerned with the instruction of the apostles for the work of mission (eg. Mt 10,1-42). The Master instructs his pupils and empowers them for a work of service in the Church .

3. " You received without charge, give without charge " (Mt 10, 8). Any tax collector who can record such a saying has clearly undergone a profound conversion of heart. Literally translated this phrase could be rendered, " You received as a free gift, give as a free gift ". The Lord demands nothing of us that he has not poured into us in the first place as the free expression of his abundant and total love for us. He asks no more of us than that we do to others as has been done to us from the bounty of God's providential care.

TWELFTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME: A

19.06.05 Mt 10, 26-33

1. The tone of confidence and authority that marks Jesus' activity throughout Matthew's gospel continues as he instructs his apostles for their work of bringing in the Kingdom of Heaven. "Do not be afraid.." (Mt 10, 26.28) is Jesus' constant refrain, which draws its power to encourage from the final, key phrase of the entire gospel: " Know that I am with you always; yes, to the end of time " (Mt 28, 20). The Master is always in charge, and has won the victory for us. There is nothing to fear except fear itself, and Jesus dispenses this like the sun that burns up the morning mist.

2. "...everything that is now covered will be uncovered, and everything now hidden will be made clear " (Mt 10, 26). Jesus will guide the Church into the fullness of the truth. The implication in this exhortation is that the teaching authority of Christ will remain with the Church as he guides the barque of Peter through every change and development of doctrine. We can be reminded of Cardinal Newman's contention that the stronger an idea is, the greater will be its ability to adapt and develop. Paradoxically, the more unchanging a truth, the more susceptible to variation and adaptation to differing circumstances.

3. The struggle with the spiritual forces of darkness are at the centre of Jesus' mission and work of salvation. A modern temptation is to see Jesus' goodness in merely social or ethical terms. But the overthrow of the powers of hell is at the centre of all his ministry and passion. Only in Matthew is the extraordinary account of the earthquake after the death of Jesus (Mt 27, 51-54), and in no other gospel are there so many examples of miracles of deliverance from possession and the influence of evil spirits (Mt 4, 24; 8, 28ff; 9, 32ff; 12, 22ff; 17, 14ff). Thus, Jesus warns us here against the destructive power of Satan.

FEAST OF SS PETER AND PAUL

29.06.05 Mt 16, 13-19

1. Two Palestinian towns bore the name of Caesar at the time of Jesus. Caesarea Maritima by the north Gallilean coast was infinitely more temperate and hospitable than the dry and dusty territory of Caesarea Philippi in the northern Palestinian area governed by the Tetrarch Philip. Caesarea Philippi was also an extremely rocky terrain, where any journeying would be slow and uncomfortable. A place less given to the production of prophetic statements could hardly be imagined. Yet God's thinking is not man's thinking, and it is this place that heralds the founding of the Church upon the rock of Peter's faith.

2. Matthew's account of Peter's profession of faith differs not so much in content as in detail from Mark's presentation of the same event (Mk 8, 27-30). Mark's account trails away from Peter as he begins to remonstrate with Jesus, who has just prophesied his Passion (Mk 8, 32b-33). It is the isolated and misunderstood Messiah that Mark wishes to emphasize. Matthew focuses on Peter and outlines the particular charism that Christ bestows on the Prince of the Apostles. Peter will be the rock that does not fail, the touchstone of judgment whereby the voice of Jesus can be heard and understood without fear of error.

3. These extraordinary blessings received by Peter embarrass many exegetes who use Mark's account to cut away the inconvenient bits of Matthew, dismissing them as early Church propaganda. This view accepts as gospel the assumption that Mark was written before Matthew. It also assumes that the accounts are essentially antagonistic to one another. In fact, they marvellously complement each other and clearly illustrate the oft repeated observation that the gospels are four portraits of the same person, not four photographs. The different styles and emphasis of the evangelists are as evident as the fact that they write about the same events.