

Sunday By Sunday

Our Regular Guide to the Word Of God in the Sunday Liturgy
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31ST IN ORDINARY TIME: A

3.11.02, Mt 23, 1-12

1. Matthew writes for a convert Jewish audience who wish to know clearly the Jewish background and influence upon the Messiah. They wish to be well grounded in their Christianity, having both feet firmly on the ground that they may live, love and defend the Jesus whom they have come to know as Saviour and Lord. In short, they seek the gift of humility so that they may know God in Jesus and may submit to him, living the faith of their fathers in the light of this new and everlasting covenant. Matthew records for them the teaching of Jesus. 2. Why are we not to be called Rabbi, father or teacher? To a Jewish audience, the holiness of God would have been paramount - his utter transcendence and total otherness from his creation. Blasphemy is to usurp God in any way, so if the Messiah reveals God here as Rabbi, Father in heaven and teacher in Christ, who then is to usurp the place of God and take these titles on themselves? It would be an offence to God and a gross presumption. It would be to descend into hypocrisy and play at righteousness like the Pharisees. 3. But Catholic priests are called, 'Father', so why do they disobey the express wish of Christ in Sacred Scripture? Insofar as any of us take to ourselves the attributes and power of God in our lives, whatever we style ourselves, then we will be deluded and a snare to true faith in God. Catholic priests take the title 'Father' because they put on the person and character of Christ at their ordination. They are not called 'Father' in their own right, but in humble recognition that Christ works through them in a particular and blessed way after their ordination.

32ND IN ORDINARY TIME: A

10.11.02, Mt 25, 1-13

1. Terrible persecution accompanied the early days of the Church, especially in the Palestinian cities where the apostles made many converts to the Lord Jesus (cf. Acts 8, 1). It must have seemed that the bridegroom would never come to consummate his marriage to the Church. The tendency to fall asleep in faith and to despair of the coming of the Lord must have been considerable in the Matthean church communities. Yet the Lord comes at a time unexpected with urgent demands and pressing needs. Matthew warns of no hasty second coming of Jesus. The Faith must be established in the power of the Holy Spirit even in

times of persecution. 2. We need to pray earnestly for the grace to give long and sustained service to Christ. In season and out, all of us are called to stay awake and attend to the needs of the Master. It is one of the privileges of priesthood to witness the ebbing of life in people who have fought the good fight and kept the Faith until the end. Special graces of peace and resignation to the love of God are often experienced in the dying of such people, which is no more than the dawning of new life in Christ. 3. However well intentioned, using other people has no place in the kingdom of God. Political correctness sometimes dictates the manipulation of others for some ulterior, self-seeking purpose. Kissing babies by politicians at election time is a classic example, but there are many others. One motive for using others is to hide defects in ourselves. It is for this fault that the five foolish bridesmaids find themselves excluded from the nuptials. Their colleagues were not cruel to refuse them their oil, but merely attentive to the greater imperative of providing for the bridegroom. No amount of sweet talking atones for this defect of duty

33rd in Ordinary Time A

17.11.02, Mt 25, 14-30

1. Natural abilities and prowess of every kind are neutral attributes. They do not make us shine in the sight of God. They have no moral quality of their own. Thus Our Lord is unspecific about the talents in the parable he relates. Their number and nature are irrelevant. It is action that counts, and no excuses will be acceptable for the deliberate misuse of gifts, especially a self-serving, false humility. Our talents will always give us the opportunity to bring in the kingdom of God, if we do not squander them in selfish pursuits contrary to the Divine Will

2. We all have unique and unrepeatable talents. This is because we are all created individually to the image and likeness of God. Each of us has a specific work to do within the Body of Christ for the up-building of the Church. This divine work is entrusted to us and is where our true happiness lies. But if we do not respond to God's graces and fail to produce the expected harvest for the kingdom, then what we have will be taken away and entrusted to those who do receive the promptings of the Holy Spirit.

3. Responding to God is a matter of fidelity. This virtue is the ability to stick to the matter in hand and do the work of the Lord. There can be many reasons for unprofitability in the things of God. One nagging aspect may well be our own reluctance to go the whole way with Jesus, never saying 'no' to him or putting off the job to be done till a supposedly more convenient time. Tomorrow never comes, and the Kingdom of Heaven is always a matter for today. We must be the hands and heart of Jesus to this generation.

Feast of Christ the King A

24.11.02, Mt 25, 31-46

1. "Go away from me, with your curse upon you." (Mt 25, 41). It is not God's curse that damns us, but our own. G. K. Chesterton famously explained final judgment in terms of God's response to the exercise of our own freewill. Either we say to God, 'Thy will be done', or God says to us with reluctance, 'Alright, thy will be done'. If we show by the choices we make and the kind of life we lead that we do not want to be with God in all eternity, then we do not have to be. Hell is of our own making. 2. The idea of Hell when invoked by unsubtle preachers can be cynically exploited as a means of provoking servile fear in a congregation. Such an attitude may not be far from superstition. Such memories or possibilities, however, should not mask us from the reality of Hell. Just as it is possible to surrender willingly to God, so also it is possible to reject God utterly and turn away from him. We can be fitted for heaven through the inner action of grace, or we can adopt an autonomy, which places ourselves at the centre of the universe. The choice is ours. 3. Choices need to be lived out. Often, the hidden intentions of our hearts are shown up by the way we act. If we are dishonest with ourselves, the truth discovers us as our mask slips. Salvation and damnation in this parable are both surprises for those that receive them. How can we be sure that we be counted among the sheep in the Final Judgment? "In so far as you did this to one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did it to me" (Mt 25, 40). Action, not thoughts: deeds, not words, count before God.

1ST SUNDAY OF ADVENT: B

01.12.02, Mk 13, 33-37

1. Persecution in the early Church often meant that Christian writings had to be kept short and precise. The Codex Vaticanus, one of the oldest copies of the New Testament extant, is printed in three unadorned columns on each scroll instead of the more normal two decorated columns because of this fear of anti-Christian hatred. Mark's gospel may be the shortest of the evangelical writings for the same reason. Only sixteen chapters outline the life, death and resurrection of Jesus in brief language frequently stripped of detail. Interpreting Mark can be like climbing a sheer cliff with few footholds. 2. This brevity does not imply in any way that Mark's work is inferior to the other gospels. The loneliness of Jesus in human terms comes through most forcefully in the shortest gospel. His identity as the Son of God is never fully realized before the highpoint of his death upon the Cross (Mk, 15, 39). Jesus' disciples are at their dullest, misunderstanding the Master in all his attempts to teach them. (Mk 4, 41; 8, 33). Most of all, the great moment of the resurrection in Mark ends not in the

exaltation of the Messiah, but in the fleeing of the first resurrection witnesses, “for they were terrified” (Mk 16, 8). 3. Even in this extract, when Jesus is talking of the end of the world just before his Passion, there is poignancy in his appeal to the disciples. He is telling them to stay awake in their newfound faith and way of life, so that the Day of Judgment does not overtake them unprepared. Yet we know from Luke’s gospel (Lk 22, 45) that the disciples did indeed sleep soon after this discourse, when it would have been nobler for them to stay awake and pray whilst Jesus underwent his agony in the garden. As so often in Mark. Jesus’ appeal falls on deaf ears.

2ND SUNDAY OF ADVENT: B

08.12.02, Mk 1,1-8

1. John the Baptist remains an intriguing New Testament figure. His witness to the Messiah thunders forth fearlessly in the pages of the gospel (Mk 1, 4), yet he still manages to remain somewhat enigmatic and hidden. Recent documentary and archaeological discoveries of an apocalyptic community living in the desert area around Qumran, near the Dead Sea, from 200BC have thrown light on the whole area of existing in the wilderness. Such an action denoted rebellion and a challenge to the status quo. It was also a preparation for the coming of the Messiah. John is both prophet and precursor. 2. Purification and washing were fundamental aspects of life in the Qumran community. Ritual impurity was detestable before God, and so washing and careful preparation of the correct foods took elaborate forms. Jugs with thin necks and tiny apertures have been found, thus preventing flies and insects from defiling drink and washing vessels. The washing preached by John looked outward, not inward. It was directed toward the other, not focused in on self. He sought to prepare a people for their Messiah through inner conversion of life and the confession of their sins, not by a mere outward washing. 3. Embracing the gospel always means repentance. If we are self-satisfied and seek to meet God on equal terms, then darkness and delusion are all we will receive from our own hands. How can God reach into our lives if the only need we have for him is for him to be moulded according to our own selfish and pitiful image? Only in the brokenness that leads us to confess our sins to the priest do we find that God is utterly different from us. He promises us newness of life, not more of the same. Jesus draws us from the wilderness of sin.

3RD SUNDAY OF ADVENT: B

15.12.02, Jn1, 6-8.19-28

1. The magnificent sweep and vision of John's Prologue identifies the coming of the Word with the creative and sustaining power of God in Genesis (cf. Jn 1, 1-5 and Gen 1, 1-5). "The Word was with God and the Word was God" (Jn 1, 1). In these first lines of the fourth gospel, no phrase in the original Greek is more than two syllables long. Punchy words convey the essence of eternity, as the symphony of images reaches its crescendo in line 14: "And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt amongst us". The wonder of the Incarnation breaks upon us in majesty and simplicity. Human history is transformed forever. 2. Only in the pre-existence of Jesus as the Word of God can the power of the preaching of John the Baptist be fully appreciated. By including him in his Prologue, the evangelist manages to capture something of the impact that the Baptist must have had on his audience. Here was something new, and a power to prophesy in the name of the Lord that was as fresh as it was ancient. So compelling were the words of this Holy Man that the evangelist has to remind us repeatedly, "He was not the light" (Jn 1, 8). Humility accompanies greatness. 3. The Pharisees' presence hints at future opposition to the Word. Straight questioning leads to straight answers. The Baptist gives as good as he gets, though the fact of his being questioned can have been of no surprise to him. His preaching was finding a home in hearts of ordinary men and women, and the religious authorities in Jerusalem were increasingly rattled. The final reaction and verdict of the Pharisees is not mentioned, no doubt because it is of no importance to the evangelist at this point. But their contempt is left hanging in the air, hinting at persecution.

4TH SUNDAY OF ADVENT: B

22.12.02, Lk 1,26-38

1. Luke's account of the origins of the Incarnation contrasts strongly with the transcendent imagery employed by John (cf. Jn 1, 1-18). Everything in this account appears homely and ordinary. The scene is essentially simple, which adds weight to the extraordinary drama beginning to unfold. There is none of the meditated theology of John in Luke, but rather the teaching power is underpinned by a straightforward, though carefully crafted, outline of the historical facts of the Annunciation. This is Greek historical writing at its concise best, elaborating the facts simply whilst working in a wealth of information about all the characters involved. 2. Human response to divine grace is no instant phenomenon. We are not like angels, who exercise freewill in an immediately binding option for or against their Creator. Our physical nature means that our choices are not instantly decisive, but must be lived out in a lifetime of growing response to, or

rejection of, the divine. Mary would have had to grow and respond to the 'yes' she uttered to God in the presence of his messenger. Daily she would have had to respond afresh to the outpourings of divine grace in her life, abandoning herself to the providence of God. 3. Mary the model of human response to God should fill us all with courage, as we battle to choose the good and refuse evil in our every day lives. It was not easier for her than it is for us. In fact, it would have been harder. Our natures are coarsened by sin, which desensitises us to the full reality of evil at work in our world. Mary would have seen the horror of sin. In her immaculate state, she would have experienced the trials of this world every bit as forcefully as her Son. Yet she triumphed, through God's grace.

FEAST OF THE HOLY FAMILY: B

29.12.02, Lk 2, 22-40

1. The humanity of Jesus means that he needs a human family, as we all do. Mary and Joseph are not optional extras in the Mystery of the Incarnation. Though, of course, Mary's role is primary in the plan of God for the coming of the Christ into the world, Joseph is also fundamental to the healthy development of the child. Nothing can replace the love of a mother in the maturing of a child, especially in the maturing of the Christ child, but that mutual love can find outward expression in the environment of the family represented primarily by the father. 2. A loving father adds focus, growth, confidence and an insight into the world of adulthood for a child that the mother cannot provide in the same objective way. Given half the chance, a child will bond with a loving father. The strength of that bond within a family environment within marriage gives the mother sustenance and a break to recoup her powers in the ceaseless task of nurturing her child. From a child's point of view, the greatest thing a father can do is to love its mother. A child that sees a basic love between parents can learn to love.

3. Jesus needs to grow to maturity (Lk 2, 40). This implies no diminishing of his divinity. It is rather a reflection of the perfection of his human nature. For a human being, to live is to grow. What more perfect environment could there have been for that perfect humanity to have grown and developed in than the gentle but ardent love of Mary, supported by the chaste loving and care of Joseph? This marriage was real in every sense, though no intercourse took place because of the unique vocation of each in the nurturing of the Christ. Jesus grew through their love.