

Sunday By Sunday

Our Regular Guide to the Word Of God in the Sunday Liturgy

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FEAST OF ALL SAINTS

02.11.03 Mt 5, 1-12 1. One of the great blessings when travelling in the Holy Land is the unspoilt nature of many of the pilgrimage sites. The Mount of Beatitudes in Galilee has a beautiful church at the summit, looking down upon the rolling pasture where the crowds sat down to hear Jesus' sermon. He would have spoken from high up on a hill that curves round on either side, forming a natural amphitheatre. Jesus' voice would have carried easily in such an atmosphere, where the natural elements would have aided the supernatural teaching that Our Lord lavished on an attentive humanity. 2. Humanity is transformed through the touch of the divine. The impact of the Divine Word made flesh in person, of his words and works in history, presents mankind with a terrifying challenge in which none can be neutral. Either we are remade in the humiliation of conversion and rebirth to new life away from sin, or we react in confusion and anger, even hatred, at the One who never demands less than all and attacks our pride. A saint is not someone who has never sinned, but someone who knows their utter need of God and is willing to give all to Him. 3. With Jesus, worldly wisdom is confounded and turned on its head. The cynic would comment that the poor in spirit are losers, the gentle get pushed around, those who mourn should be hidden from view, those who hunger and thirst for justice are on a naïve crusade. The merciful get hit doubly hard, the pure in heart don't know anything about anything, peacemakers waste their time, and those persecuted in the cause of right have obviously backed the wrong horse. But Jesus doesn't peddle death. Like the saints who imitated Him so closely, Our Lord is about life in abundance.

THE DEDICATION OF THE LATERAN BASILICA

09.11.03 Jn 2, 13-22

1. Bricks and mortar in the Jewish Temple prefigured the flesh and blood that would clothe the Divine Word in Jesus. The Divine Presence, or "shekinah" in Hebrew, filled the Holy of Holies, sanctifying that place and Mount Zion on which the Temple was built. This Presence was the same as was beheld by Moses, which so terrified the people of Israel that they dared not approach: " At daybreak on the third day there were peals of thunder on the mountain and lightning flashes, a dense cloud, and a loud trumpet blast, and inside the camp all the people trembled " (Ex 19,16). 2. The mighty God of Israel was a holy God -

transcendent, apart, yet seeking relationship with his Chosen People. This desire to communicate with man was the sovereign initiative of God, implying no necessity or lack of perfection. God's dealings with his creature always remain a divine initiative and the prerogative of the Creator. The Jewish Temple subsequently became the place where this Presence came to tabernacle among men. Thus the building was one of the most magnificent in the whole ancient world: it was the pride of Judaism and the holiest place on earth.³ Yet the fullness of Divine Presence among men could only be achieved in the Incarnation - when the Word became flesh and dwelt among us (Jn 1, 14). The magnificence of the Temple is taken up into the bruised and derided flesh of the crucified, only to be restored in heavenly splendour at the Resurrection. Now God is tabernacled in the living flesh of Jesus in each and every Catholic church. The figure has become a reality in Christ, and the first and foremost of all churches throughout the world is the Basilica of St John Lateran in Rome, the cathedral of the universal pontiff.

33RD SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME: B

16.11.03 Mk 13, 24-32

1. " Know that he is near, at the very gates" (Mk 13, 29). Jesus is the nearness of God, but how we receive that news determines our salvation. It is made quite clear that the Second Coming of the Lord will be in power and obvious to all, even the most ardent rejecter of God. It will be the heir coming into his own inheritance, for all creation was made through him and for him. Given the fact of sin and the influence of evil in men's lives, it will be a time of great tribulation as the light of truth in Jesus reveals all.² Apocalyptic literature grew up in Judaism as an attempt to struggle with the devastating history that the people of Israel had suffered. How could the promises given by God to Israel be understood in the face of bitter persecution and exile? It was impossible that God would not care exclusively for Abraham's descendants, so many in Israel came to believe that these promises would be fulfilled beyond history in a heaven of justice and peace. Hence a growth in belief in the afterlife in late post-exilic Judaism. The end of the world will be the day of reckoning for all.³ Chesterton remarked that when we come before God for judgment either we say to God, 'Thy will be done', or else the Lord says to us with infinite sadness, 'Your will be done'. If we do not wish to be with God for all eternity, we do not have to be. The decision lies with us. God is not some angry tribal chieftain. He is a God of love and mercy, who has given us free will and will not force us to love him. Our lives witness to the decision of our hearts, and God respects our decisions.

FEAST OF CHRIST THE KING

23.11.03 Jn 18, 33-37

1. The impetus for the institution of this feast in the universal calendar came from the martyrdom of Fr Michael Pro, a Mexican Jesuit at the time of the fiercely anti-Catholic Mexican Revolution. As Fr Pro was led out to the firing squad, he made one last stand for Christ. Before the soldiers fired their rifles, Fr Michael stretched out his arms in the shape of a cross and shouted, "Viva Cristo Rey!" - Long live Christ the King. His cry rang throughout the Church, and the Pope included a feast in the general liturgical calendar celebrating the universal sovereignty of Jesus. 2. Just as Michael Pro acknowledged his priesthood before an unjust tribunal, so Christ asserts his heavenly kingship before a struggling and incredulous Pilate: "Yes, I am a king. I was born for this, I came into the world for this: to bear witness to the truth; and all who are on the side of truth listen to my voice" (Jn 18, 37). Jesus' kingship is a kingship of the cross - the wood of the tree on which he hung is the throne of his glory. His power is not worldly, but from the Father in heaven. Thus it is eternal and universal. 3. The central paradox in Christianity is that in his greatest defeat comes Jesus' greatest victory; through death comes life; through shameful condemnation and criminal execution comes universal sovereignty and the supreme kingship of Christ crucified. Like her Master, the Church is constantly derided, scorned and dismissed; but in this crucifixion she wins salvation for her sons and daughters, who are called to share in the cross of Jesus that we might also share in his victory. Only through the grace of the Holy Spirit is this possible, when ordinary people like Fr Pro follow in the footsteps of Christ the King.

FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT: C

30.11.03 Lk 21,25-28.34-36

1. "Stay awake, praying at all times for the strength to survive all that is going to happen" (Lk 21, 36). Our Lord's words are hardly consoling, but, given the fact of sin and evil in the world, they are truth and life. Only in him is sure protection against the dangers of this world that threaten us. Only in surrendering to his divine providence, despite repeated failures and often bitter struggles, do we find a peace that surpasses human understanding and endures to eternal life. Ultimately, only this sustained the twelve simple men who first preached the Good News of Jesus Christ. 2. Fr Walter Ciszek spent 23 years as a priest in Soviet Russia, "surrounded on all sides by an atmosphere of unbelief and godlessness, an atmosphere of atheistic propaganda that was almost suffocating" (He Leadeth Me, p169). Yet Fr Ciszek's sheer trust in God shone through: " What were any of us in the face of the system around us? Yet in God's providence, here we were. This was the place he had chosen for us, the situation and circumstances in which he had placed us. One thing we could do and do

daily: we could seek first the kingdom of God and his justice” (ibid. p170).3. Our Lord asks nothing more than that we give ourselves entirely to him. This costs us because it means that we must abandon those things that prevent us from journeying towards him, especially the sin that clings so easily. It is a struggle, it is a challenge, but it is the only fight worth fighting, and persevering in to the end. The grace of fidelity will be given to those that seek God with all their hearts because God will never be outdone in generosity. If we die to self through his grace, then we will be given strength “to stand with confidence before the Son of Man” (Lk 21, 36).

SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT: C

07.12.03 Lk 3, 1-6

1. Luke’s gospel is characterized by its concern to write history, evoking the style of ancient Greek writers like Thucydides. In a highly dramatic opening to the account of Jesus’ public ministry, Luke orientates and defines his narrative within a specific political and religious context. We are talking about historical events occurring whilst Herod held sway in Galilee during the time of the Emperor Tiberias, when the Jewish High Priesthood was exercised by Annas and Caiaphas. The contemporary readers of Luke, who was himself a Greek doctor, would have been non-Jewish gentile converts to Christianity, eager for accurate instruction.2. The voice of John, son of Zechariah, erupts suddenly into a world governed by powerful people of great decadence. Yet it is a world ripe for the sowing of the seed of the kingdom of God. No time is ever convenient for those who would be deaf to the truth, and John’s cry to prepare a way for the Lord jars discordantly with the comfortable and the self-satisfied among whom he is named. Like the voice of any Israelite prophet , John’s words attack the root of sin in society and preach a salvation in God that will not wait.3. Advent means listening to the call of John the Baptist once more, whether the time is right for us or not. We need to get under the material gloss that so dominates our contemporary build-up to Christmas, and we need to challenge our own sinful ways and attitudes by acknowledging the plain truth of our need for God’s forgiveness. Confession is the sacrament proper to this season of expectation. Unless we can find it in our hearts to repent and be converted, then there will be no room in the Inn of our souls for the Christ child to be born.

THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT: C

14.12.03 Lk 3, 10-18

1. Two Lucan themes arise immediately in this gospel: care for the poor and the powerful influence of the Holy Spirit. Various types of people come to John asking him how they can show their repentance in concrete ways. Each group receives a specific direction, but all the people are required to clothe the naked and feed the poor (Lk 3, 11). This is not an optional extra in the Christian life, for, if we cannot love the neighbour whom we do see, how can we claim to love the God whom we do not? John's own poverty would have reinforced his message.2. Only the Son can bequeath the Holy Spirit as the proper inheritance of those who accept the preaching and person of the Messiah. The fire of this Holy Spirit convicting the believer of faith in Jesus through a new and supernatural baptism is contrasted in no uncertain terms with the unquenchable fires of hell. No-one can be neutral to God, and none can resist the winnowing fan of our Saviour and Redeemer. If the starkness of choices laid down by the Baptist frightens us, we must realize that it is meant to. John preached a real repentance from the heart.3. Like the Master who followed after him, John associates with the sinners and degenerates of society. Tax Collectors were hated as Jewish collaborators with foreign overlords. Supplementing their income through extortion and sharp practice made them even more reviled. Luke highlights the profound reaction that John's words had on Jewish society by reporting the repentance of this hardened group. Soldiers too were for the most part avoided, and not just for their brutality. They would have been Syrian mercenaries conscripted into the Roman army to serve in Israel - a traditional enemy to the Jews and much loathed.

FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT: C

21.12.03 Lk 1, 39-45

1. None made a better preparation for Christmas than Mary: "Blessed is she who believed that the promise made her by the Lord would be fulfilled" (Lk 1, 45). Each of these holy women ministers to the other first, in the joy of the Holy Spirit, before any thought of themselves or the precariousness of their respective positions. Elizabeth was pregnant in old age in primitive conditions, and Mary herself was pregnant before she had come to live with her husband - an offense punishable by stoning in Jewish Law. As the child grows in the Virgin Mother, so she and her cousin grow spiritually.2. The exaltation of the mothers is an outward expression of the joy and communion between the children in their wombs. Elizabeth's words to Mary burst forth in utter conviction of soul, as she prophesies and comes to know through the Holy Spirit what would have been known only to Mary and Joseph: "Why should I be honoured with a visit from the mother of my Lord?" (Lk 1, 43). John greets the Messiah, whose presence he is to announce, with his whole being as he leaps in Elizabeth's womb. Thus he communicates the grace he has received to the mother who bears him.3. Blessed Teresa of Calcutta was fond of emphasizing after the solemn

profession of her sisters that the first one to recognize Jesus was the unborn child. The scourge of abortion filled her with horror, and she never ceased to do all she could in her simple and direct way to challenge the false notion that an embryo was not a child. Her influence was profound and direct. We need to learn from her to stand up to lies that kill. Pro-life work is for all, if we are to welcome the Christ child into our lives and back into our society.

CHRISTMAS DAY

25.12.03 Jn 1, 1-18

1. Who is this Jesus, that I might know him? John gives a majestic meditation on the person of the Word made flesh (Jn 1, 14). Pre-existence permeates these verses as a theme and preparation for the words and works of Jesus in the gospel. Our Lord exists for time and eternity in the bosom of the Father, whom he took flesh to reveal. There never was a time when the Son was not. The evangelist stresses, “the Word was with God and the Word was God” (Jn 1, 1). This Jesus is God, seeking relationship with his creature so that his life might be in us (cf. Jn 1, 4-5).2. The wonder of the Incarnation is that God should deign to become a vulnerable and struggling child in the manger at Bethlehem. He is a king, but it will be a kingship of Christ crucified, not of this world with all its vanity and power to corrupt. Faith and trust are needed to fathom such an outrageously bizarre claim. And yet it is true, whether we believe it or not. John adds, “to all who did accept him he gave power to become children of God” (Jn 1, 12). We need to get a life - a life that will last eternally.3. That life is the person of God, who seeks to meet us in Jesus. Christ is encountered in the tradition and life of the Church, in the Scriptures and in the sacraments (especially Holy Communion). It is the selfsame Lord who walked the earth two thousand years ago; who strove, suffered and died for us. His presence among us in the Eucharist is as physical and real now as it was then, but under the outward appearance of sacramental signs. His love, too, is as real now as it was then. He calls us to believe and taste his life.

FEAST OF THE HOLY FAMILY: C

29.12.03 Lk 2, 41-52

1. This account of the Finding of the Child Jesus in the Temple is unique to Luke’s gospel. It delights us because it offers the rarest of glimpses into the hidden life of Our Lord - those thirty years of quiet before John baptized Jesus in the River Jordan (cf. Lk 3, 21ff). The story is unusual, but accessible and easy to imagine. Jesus’ reply to his mother still astounds us, no matter how well we

think we can explain his attitude. The truth is that, for all its telling, the hidden quality of this story remains. There are mysteries here that we struggle to fathom.² “ My child, why have you done this to us?” (Lk 2,48). All Mary’s worry and concern pour out in this gentle, but direct challenge to her child. Jesus’ reply has all the matter-of-fact attitude of precocious pre-adolescent boys. He must have learnt his directness from his mother, for he gives as good as he gets. But there is a higher quality to his words, evidence of the mystical union that he always enjoys with the Father in heaven. As a human being, Jesus would have deepened in his awareness of his relationship with the Father as he developed in his humanity.³ Family life nurtures us all, and is the proper environment for human living and loving. Those who have no family need to be welcomed and allowed to grow in the family of the Church. Yet, given the fact of sin, families can also be places of breakdown and distortion. Divorce and the wholesale rejection of marriage as an unbreakable life-long union, for better or worse, mean that our present society becomes sick from within. We need to strive to let the Christ child be born again in our hearts today. As individuals and as a society, only he can restore brokenness.