

Commentary on Sunday Scripture Readings

Palm Sunday – Year B

First reading:

The Song of the Servant
(Isaiah 50.4-7)

In the Book of Isaiah occur four songs, of which this is the third, sung by a mysterious Servant of the Lord. It is not clear who this Servant is, but he is totally dedicated to the service of the Lord, a disciple who listens devotedly. Through suffering, this Servant brings to fulfilment the salvation that the Lord intends for Israel and for the world. Jesus saw himself in the terms of this Servant, and the four songs feature throughout the liturgy of Holy Week.

Second reading:

Raised high through suffering
(Philippians 2.6-11)

This hymn was probably not written by Paul himself, but taken up by him into the letter, a very early Christian hymn. It celebrates the triumph of Jesus through his selflessness. The assertions at the end are staggering. The hymn claims for Jesus the titles and the worship that are due only to God. What is more, this acknowledgement of Jesus does not detract from the glory of God, but is precisely 'to the glory of God the Father'. This is perhaps the fullest statement in Paul of the divine glory of Jesus, and it is won by his humiliation in death.

Gospel:

The Passion
(Mark 14.1-15.47)

Jesus deserted

The gospel of Mark is concerned to show Jesus as a real, human person. So the story of the Passion begins with the very real fear and horror of Jesus in the garden. Mark represents Jesus as almost beside himself with apprehension at the torture that he knew he would suffer. Again and again he returns to seek companionship from his disciples, to find them callously asleep. The Passion story ends, too, with a loud cry of agony as Jesus breathes his last.

The divine Jesus

The core of the Passion story is the trial scene. Before the high priest, Jesus acknowledges that he is the Messiah of Judaism, and the Son of the Blessed One. To these titles he joins 'Son of man'. In the Book of Daniel, the Son of man is a glorious figure who triumphs over persecution to receive from God all power on earth. So now Jesus claims to share God's throne as that Son of man. It is for these divine claims that he is rejected as a blasphemer and handed over to the Romans.

The triumph of God

When Jesus cries out on the Cross, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me', he is not in despair, but is beginning Psalm 22. The Psalm begins in persecution, but ends in the triumph of God and the vindication of the sufferer. This gives the meaning of his Passion: by it, Jesus brings the triumph of God and his

own vindication by God. The Cross is the moment, not of abandonment by God, but of the most complete union of Jesus to the Father. Jesus here establishes the Sovereignty of his Father by his total, loving obedience. This is why the centurion proclaims, 'Truly, the man was Son of God.' It is also significant that here

for the first time in the gospel a human being recognizes Jesus as Son of God. And he is not a Jew but, rather, a gentile - the beginning of the spread of the gospel to all nations of the world.

Easter Sunday – Year B

First reading:

*Peter Instructs Cornelius
(Acts 10.34, 37-43)*

Peter was speaking to Cornelius. Cornelius was the Roman centurion who already revered God and had had a vision that he should invite Peter to come and instruct him. Peter shows that Jesus was a real human being. He went about, bringing God's peace to everyone he could meet. Nevertheless, he was executed as a criminal. So God reacted by raising him from death to a life that was totally new. This was the fulfilment of all the promises made to Israel, bringing to completion God's plan in creation. Life moved into a new gear. Peter expresses this that God has appointed the Risen Jesus to judge the living and the dead. The Jews expected that at the end of time, at the completion of all things, God would come to set everything to rights, to judge things according to their true worth. Now Peter says that Jesus is the one who will be this judge. Jesus is the Lord who will bring all things to completion and to judgment. By his rising from the dead, Jesus comes to this position of supreme authority over the whole world. Paul put it that he was 'constituted Son of God in power' by the Resurrection.

Question:

What do you find the most encouraging aspect of Easter?

Second reading:

*New Life in Christ
(Colossians 3.1-4)*

This reading is the visible tip of an iceberg, of which much more lies below the surface! Paul here tells us that all our interest must be in heavenly things, the things of Christ, because we share Christ's life. What is more, that life is no ordinary life. What does all this mean? We share Christ's life because faith in Christ means that we put all our trust and hope in Christ. We have been baptized into Christ, that is, by baptism we have been dipped into Christ as into a river, and come up soaked with Christ, or dripping with Christ. I am growing into Christ, share his inheritance, his status as son of God. The wellspring of my life is no longer the ordinary, natural life that enables me to live, breathe, digest, feel, see, sing and play, love and hate. It is the Spirit of Christ that spurs me to generosity, service, kindness, self-control, peace and openness. This life, says Paul, is still hidden, and will be fully manifested only at the coming of Christ. But if I am to be true to my profession of faith in baptism,

the principles on which I operate must be those of this risen life of Christ.

Question:

How can I help non-Christians to appreciate the wonder of Easter?

Alternative second reading:

*The Paschal Lamb
(1 Corinthians 5.6b-8)*

Paul is obviously referring to the Jewish festival of the Passover, at which a lamb was sacrificed. This festival was originally the meal commemorating the move of pastoral nomads at the beginning of spring from their winter to their summer pastures. A lamb was sacrificed as an offering to the gods. After the exodus from Egypt the festival came to celebrate the great trek of 40 years through the desert, and the Covenant of Moses on Sinai, when Israel became God's people. When Israel settled down and became agriculturalists, this festival coincided with the Week of Unleavened Bread, marking the beginning of the wheat harvest, when all last year's wheat products and leaven were cast aside as corrupt and outdated, 'past their sell-by-date'. Leaven is, after all, fermented, and so, in some sense at least, corrupt. Thus the Passover Festival became associated with total newness. At the Last Supper Jesus sealed the New Covenant and gave himself to his disciples as the new paschal lamb, the sacrifice of this New Covenant. Paul uses this symbolism to indicate that Christians are people of total newness. Their conduct must be purged of all the old corruption and marked by a new freshness, the innocence and purity of new life.

Question:

How can I help non-Christians appreciate the wonder of Easter?

Gospel:

*The Empty Tomb
(John 20.1-9)*

There are several accounts in the various gospels of the discovery of the empty tomb. The slight variations between them show all the marks of oral tradition, for in genuine oral tradition each 'performance' is different. Different people tell the story slightly differently, stressing different aspects. This story stresses the proof that the tomb really was empty, for the apostles examine the evidence carefully. Other accounts concentrate less on the evidence and more on the message, that they will meet the Risen Lord in Galilee. It was important to establish that the tomb was empty, to prevent the charge that the meetings with the Risen Christ were simply ghost appearances. Apart from the proof that this was a real, living and bodily person, these meetings stress two factors, the power of the Risen Christ and the commission given to the disciples. They are to go out into the whole world and spread the message, always accompanied by and strengthened by Christ himself. In this account, Simon Peter is clearly the senior, authority figure, to whom the Beloved Disciple defers. But it is the love of the Beloved Disciple that immediately brings him to faith.

Question:

Is the empty tomb the chief evidence for the Resurrection?

Second Sunday of Easter – Year B

First reading:

Christian Sharing
(Acts 4.32-35)

On the next six Sundays of Eastertide we hear the story of the earliest Christian community. Each Eastertide the Church puts it forward as a model for us, giving important aspects of their life. This first reading stresses the unity of the community, and the mutual caring to ensure that no one is in want. This care of those in need, and particularly in financial matters, remains a strong challenge to us today. The care for the needy remains a strong emphasis throughout the Bible, from the earliest part of the law codes of Israel until the Letter of James and beyond. As man and woman are made in the image of God, we are to care for one another and for those in need as God cares for us; this is part of the human obligation to foster life and to care for creation.

The gospel of Luke especially stresses the dangers of wealth and the need to use wealth responsibly and generously. This is followed through in the Acts of the Apostles as part of being 'one in heart and mind'. The other feature of their life together is the bold proclamation of the Resurrection of the Lord.

Question:

How far is the model practicable for a modern Christian community?

Second reading:

Begotten by God
(1 John 5.1-6)

The second readings for the Sundays of Eastertide this year are all from the first Letter of John. The main topic is Christian love. It is quite significant that this Sunday's passage is out of order. It centres on two overarching aspects of Christian love, which are vital for any genuine manifestation of that love. The first aspect is that this love, which conquers the world, is built on faith in Jesus as Son of God. 'The world' here stands for all the evil and godless attitudes standing in opposition to Christian values. By raising Jesus from the dead God has shown the vanity of these attitudes, and has made the victory of Christian love over them sure. These are the true values that in the end will prevail. The second aspect is that by Christian love we are raised to be sons of God, co-heirs with Christ and able to cry 'Abba, Father' truly to God. To the Hebrew mind to be a 'son of' is wider than mere physical generation. It involves respect, devotion, obedience, keeping an eye on, careful conformity in desire, ability and behaviour. It is much like being 'in the image of', but closer, stronger, more heartfelt and more intimate.

Question:

Which imagery do you prefer: to be a son of God or in the image of God??

Gospel:

*Jesus in the Upper Room
(John 20.19-31)*

Two aspects of this meeting are especially striking. This is the last scene of the gospel of John, for Chapter 21 is an appendix. At the end, before the concluding reflection, Thomas gives the only direct acclamation in the New Testament of Jesus as God. Nowhere else is Jesus directly hailed as 'God', although there are ways in which he is equivalently so presented. So in a way this acclamation of the Risen Christ is the climax of the New Testament. Second, it is striking that Jesus' final blessing is of peace and forgiveness. The mission of all Christians is to bring these to a troubled world.

Throughout the Bible God is a God of forgiveness. The Old Testament consists of a series of covenants of forgiveness, each in turn broken by God's Chosen People. The covenant with Noah after the Flood, the covenant with Abraham, with Moses after the worship of the Golden Calf, finally the new covenant promised by Jeremiah when unfaithful Israel is being exiled to Babylon. Christianity is not for the perfect but for the sinner, surrounded by sinners. Forgiven sinners must bring forgiveness to all those around them.

Question:

How far is the authority of the Church compatible with individual judgment?

Third Sunday of Easter – Year B

First reading:

*Peter's Speech to the Jews
(Acts 3.13-15, 17-19)*

This reading is the final section of Peter's speech to the people of Jerusalem after Pentecost, when he is explaining to the crowds the significance of the first miracle worked by the apostles in the power of the Spirit. Like all the speeches in Acts, it is not a word-for-word, tape-recorded report, but is a sample of Peter's preaching to the Jews. He lays the blame for Jesus' rejection squarely on them, but shows that it was just as scripture had foretold. All the speeches end with an invitation to repent. This does not mean simply to get all weepy about past sins, 'how dreadful and wicked I have been'. It means that the listeners, and we, must

change our ways, adopt God's and the Risen Christ's system of values. To convert means I was going in one direction; now I turn round and go in another. Then the way I look at the world becomes different. I see things from a different angle, God's and Christ's angle.

This sort of conversion does not so much look at the past with regret as look at the future with confidence. It is the new determination that allows God to wipe out our sins.

Question:

What difference does Christ's Resurrection make to my life??

Second reading:

*Our Advocate with the Father
(1 John 2.1-5))*

This second reading advances one step further than the first. The first is about conversion, the second about blotting out former failures. Jesus Christ is our Advocate with the Father, 'standing at the right hand of the Father', because he takes our sins away. How does he do this? By his act of obedience on the Cross Jesus wipes out the disobedience of Adam, that is, of all humanity. Adam (which means 'man') is the figure of all humanity, and Adam's sin is the symbol of all human sin, a sort of 'prequel' of all sin, an act of turning away from God, of independence and disobedience. On the Cross Jesus was perfectly united to the Father, in an act of utter obedience in love, to which the Father in love responds, with a renewal of love for all humanity.

For us, too, it is true that if we know God, if we have any appreciation of God and any personal bond to God, we cannot but obey him. God's commands are not arbitrary, but are the way of keeping close to God. By the command of love God reveals himself and invites us to be like him.

Question:

In what sense is the world renewed by the Resurrection?

Gospel:

*Fish for Supper
(Luke 24.35-48)*

The two disciples had met Jesus on their way to Emmaus. There Jesus had used the Eucharistic meal to reveal himself to them, for the Eucharist is always an occasion for us to get to know the Risen Christ better. Now he meets the whole group of disciples in their refuge, the Upper Room. It is perhaps the same incident as the one we heard last Sunday, but this time there are different emphases. Now the stress is on the meeting with a real person, not just a ghost. That is why he eats a piece of fish. The important lesson of this is that, in our Resurrection to true life, it is the whole person that is raised, not just the soul. Christian teaching is that a person is an animated body. We work out our salvation with fingers and toes and other bodily members, and all will be raised to life. It is not just a matter of thoughts and intentions! The whole body is baptized into Christ and is the instrument of our salvation. The body will be changed, and St Paul tells us that it is stupid to ask what sort of body we will have in the Resurrection, but I will be raised as a whole person.

Question:

Will we have bodies in heaven?

Fourth Sunday of Easter – Year B

First reading:

*The Healing Power of Jesus
(Acts 4.8-12)*

The Acts of the Apostles shows that the Church carries on the life of Jesus. Under the leadership and power of the Spirit it represents the Risen Christ in the world of the first century and of today. So Peter and Paul work the same sorts of miracles as Jesus as signs and works of power. They heal people, raise the dead, forgive sins and spread the Good News of the sovereignty of God, just as Jesus did. In less spectacular ways also the life of the community still continues the work of Jesus. Peter explains that all this is done 'in the name of Jesus'. The name signifies the power of a person. So we are baptized in, or even into, the name of Jesus, and in this way take on his personality and his power in the Spirit. We become the company of Jesus. It is in his name or power that we hope. In the early years of the Church Christians were known as those over whom the name of Jesus had been pronounced, that is, those who have entered under Jesus' patronage and who trust in his name.

Question:

In what ways could your local Church carry on the life of Christ more faithfully?

Second reading:

*The Love of God for his Children
(1 John 3.1-2)*

From beginning to end this first letter of John is a meditation on Christian love and its implications. The innermost motivation of all Christian activity is the awareness that we have been raised to sonship of God and to being co-heirs of God with Jesus. Both women and men have been raised to this sonship, for only sons (not daughters) could inherit. This sonship enables us to call God 'Father'. When Paul speaks of this, he uses the Aramaic word 'Abba' as a sort of talisman and guarantee that we can pray 'Father', using the same address as Jesus himself used. 'Abba' is not a children's word like 'Daddy', as has sometimes been supposed, but is the expression of a warm and responsible adult relationship. Just as Jesus' sonship of the Father consisted in doing perfectly the Father's will, and being about the Father's business in his whole life, so the Christian, spurred on by this relationship, is drawn to a heartfelt obedience. This must be a challenge to us: is the mainspring of our activity to act as sons of the Father, being truly his representatives in the world and striving to bring his will to completion in all that we do?

Question:

Does the scripture help to show us what is meant by being 'sons of God'?

Gospel:

*The Good Shepherd
(John 10.11-18)*

Each year on this Sunday there is a reading from John about the Good Shepherd. To think of ourselves as woolly and cuddly sheep, obedient to the shepherd, would be a mistake. Sheep are renowned as being silly, contradictory creatures, always starting off in the wrong direction, getting themselves into tangles and difficulties. In the Holy Land, they are scraggy beasts, pastured on rocky, often dangerous ground, amid boulders and rocky cliffs, threatened by wild animals and marauders. It was not simply a matter of the shepherd sitting on a rock and idly playing his pipe. He needed to be on the alert to save the sheep from

hurting themselves. So Jesus as the good shepherd is kept well occupied by our foibles, our stubbornness, our mistakes and our fears. Again, as in the other two readings, there is the reassurance of a close relationship with the Father. Jesus knows us intimately, just as he knows the Father. It is questionable whether in real life a shepherd should lay down his life for his sheep: what would happen to the remainder of the flock? But it is an expression of his whole-hearted devotion to the sheep, and an assimilation to the case of Jesus.

Question:

Are you a sheep?

Fifth Sunday of Easter – Year B

First reading:

*Paul's Fearless Proclamation
(Acts 9.26-31)*

This reading is the first news that we have had that the Church has spread beyond Jerusalem. Paul has received his vision of the Risen Christ and has joined the disciples, being baptized at Damascus. Then, according to his letters, he went off to Arabia for three years before going up to Jerusalem. Paul's arguing with the Hellenists (or Greeks) is a foretaste of his bringing the gospel to those beyond the borders of Judaism. His fearless proclamation of the gospel message, both in Damascus and in Jerusalem, is a characteristic of work of the early missionaries. We have already come across it in the fearless proclamation of the

message by Peter before the Jewish authorities. It will continue throughout the Acts of the Apostles, even till the end, when we see Paul proclaiming the message during his captivity in Rome. How are we to spread the gospel fearlessly? Perhaps mostly by sticking up for Christian principles in moral behaviour, such as the protection of life, the rights of the poor and disadvantaged, fearlessly facing the issues of justice, war and peace, and sexual morality. But it must also be a proclamation in love and peace.

Question:

Have we any causes for fear in making our proclamation of Christ?

Second reading:

The Two Commandments

(1 John 3.18-24)

These two commandments will dominate the rest of the letter. They are not exactly the classic two commandments of the Law, reiterated by Jesus, to love God above all and our neighbour as ourselves. The two commandments of God here are, first, to believe in the power or name of the Risen Christ, and, second, to love one another. One might say that belief in the power of the Risen Christ is an application of love for God, an aspect that is especially relevant during Eastertide. The saving power of Christ flows out from God's care for ourselves, and belief in it must both be a response in love and provoke love and gratitude. It must also make us fearless before God, full of the

Gospel:

The True Vine

(John 15.1-8)

A vine is an extraordinary plant. It can grow to a huge size, spreading over a huge area, a whole garden wall or trellis work, from one single root, and produces a rich sap that yields grapes at the end of countless little branches. And then there is the business of pruning: cut it back thoroughly on all its many shoots and tendrils, and it seems only more determined to grow thick and strong. So the vine was the symbol of Israel, drawing from the Lord a sap that penetrated to all its shoots, and lovingly pruned by the gardener in a way that best encouraged

love that casts out fear, since the power of Christ's Resurrection is a guarantee of God's acceptance of Christ's sacrifice for us. It saves us from our own sin and disobedience. It brings also fearlessness before a hostile world, with the fearlessness of which we heard in Paul's preaching in the first reading. It must also inspire fulfilment of the second commandment, love of neighbour. Such belief, issuing in love, forms the criterion for knowing that the Spirit is dwelling within us.

Question:

What does real love of neighbour involve?

its growth. The image was taken over by Jesus for his own community, the new Israel. Pairing with last week's picture of the good shepherd, it is one of the greatest of John's images. It perfectly sums up the two emphases of today's other two readings. The only source of fruitful energy for the Christian is union with and dependence on the life flowing from Christ. Without that, the branches wither and die; a trimming cut off from a vine no longer has any chance of life. The vine itself at pruning season looks stark, rough and suffering. It is, in fact, bursting with new life.

Question:

Have I benefited from the vinedresser's pruning knife?

Sixth Sunday of Easter – Year B

First reading:

The Conversion of Cornelius
(Acts 10.25-26, 34-35, 44-48)

Jesus was the Messiah of Judaism, bringing to completion the promises made to Abraham. It came as a surprise to the first Christians that the salvation brought by Jesus was meant not just for Jew alone but for all the peoples of the earth. This is the scene where it happens. Peter has been prepared for it by a vision which annulled the Jewish food laws. Then he was summoned to bring the gentile Cornelius to the faith. Now, even while he is speaking to Cornelius and his household, the Spirit takes matters (so to speak) into his own hands and comes down upon Cornelius. A gentile Pentecost. Today also we are happy to think of our own group as the chosen ones, neglecting the breadth of God's love and desire that all people should turn to him and be saved. We can read again and again that Jesus actually went out of his way to welcome lepers, prostitutes, tax collectors, and we still find it hard to believe that to God they are not 'undesirables'. God has no favourites, but it is much more comfortable for us to stay snugly wrapped up in our own neat cocoons.

Question:

How far does the message of Christ extend beyond Christianity?

Second reading:

Christian Love
(1 John 4.7-10)

At this time the Jews regarded gentiles as 'dogs'. This did not mean beloved pets, for dogs were either frightening guard dogs or filthy scavengers. The first reading showed us God actually taking gentiles to himself by sending the Spirit upon them. The second reading now meditates on the nature of that love. The old niggardly saying, 'I love him but I can't stand the sight of him', will not do if God is love itself and love itself is the nature of God. If God is not only the source of love and of life, but simply is love itself, even the distant 'wishing somebody well' from my heart is not enough. Would any of us be satisfied and comfortable with the idea that God doesn't actually like me but wishes me well in a distant sort of way? Love generates affection, respect, trust, a desire to come closer to the other. It is comforting to know that I am a son of God and can call God 'Abba', but the consequence is more daunting, that you too - whoever you are - are also the closest member of my family, despite all your faults.

Question:

Do the faults of your own family impede or enhance your love?

Gospel:

The continuing Love of Jesus

(John 15.9-17)

Like so many of the great discourses of Jesus in the gospel of John, these are not a shorthand record of Jesus' words, but will have been written up afterwards. Most probably there were several slightly different versions of what Jesus said at the Last Supper. In any case, one can see that the author has in mind two different levels, both Jesus' own historical situation at the Last Supper and the situation of the early Church, where the disciples are being hard put to the test in their mission. They need encouraging by Jesus' own example of his sacrifice and by his

promise of real friendship: they are friends, not servants, specially chosen by Jesus to bear fruit that will last. So we, too, are welcomed as friends, chosen and commissioned by Jesus to go out and bear fruit, but reminded that we must be prepared to pay the price. There is no fruit without pruning. Jesus had just given the example of service by washing the feet of his disciples. If we are to share the joy of Jesus, we must be ready to join him also in laying down his life for his friends.

Question:

Do we ever have to make hard choices for Christ?

Pentecost Sunday

First reading:

The Birth of the Church
(Acts 2.1-11)

The ministry of Jesus starts with the coming of the Spirit at his Baptism, and so the ministry of the Church begins with the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost. There can be no witness to Jesus or to his message, no spreading of the Kingship of God, without the Spirit of Jesus. Another lesson from this parallelism is that the task of the Church and the life of the Church are the same as those of Jesus himself: to bring God's kingship to its fulfilment by bringing healing, love and joy through the message of the Risen Christ. The rushing wind and the tongues of fire are an allusion to the coming of God's Spirit in the Old Testament upon Moses and the elders. So the new message is the fulfilment of the Old Testament, breaking out beyond the borders of Judaism to include all peoples of the world. The union of all these peoples, all understanding one language in their own way, is a deliberate contrast to the scene at the Tower of Babel, when all the peoples of the world were split up by their inability to understand one another's languages. The list of unpronounceable peoples is itself a witness to the universality of the Church!

Question:

*How can the Church claim to be the Spirit at work in the world?
Mention three outstanding ways in which the Church shows Christ at work today.*

Second reading:

The Body of Christ
(1 Corinthians 12.3-7, 12-13)

The slightest glance around a church full of people is enough to show the variety within the Christian community. But it needs the hints given us by Paul to remind us that every member of that community has his or her own special gift to contribute. Mercifully, these gifts are all different. It is valuable to reflect on the natural gifts that we find all around us. It is also valuable to reflect how dull, or even intolerable, life would be if I lived with a lot of clones of myself, all with the same gifts and the same faults as me! Every one of us contributes something different and valuable in its own way, whether it is the baby squeaking as a sign of new, developing life or the older person contributing wisdom, experience and even the suffering of Christ. The other inspiring thought is that all these varied and diverse people go to make up the Body which is Christ. We all have experience of various corporate bodies, organizations and companies, but none of these other bodies makes up a person. That Person is Christ, since as Christians we all live and operate through Christ's Spirit.

Question:

Who is the most Christ-like figure for you in the present or recent past?

Gospel:

The Gift of Peace

(John 20.19-23)

At first sight this is a surprising gospel reading for Pentecost, but, of course, the event of Pentecost came too late to be a subject for the gospels, and we read the account of another incident where the Risen Christ gave the Spirit to his disciples. There are two emphases in the account. The first is peace. Christ brings peace to his disciples with the double greeting of peace, and peace is a Christian watchword. Peace was the song of the angels at Jesus' birth. Each of Paul's letters opens with a greeting of peace. The letter to the Ephesians proclaims that

Christ is our peace, the reversal of all worry, strife, envy, jealousy, self-seeking ambition. 'Go in peace' is Jesus' dismissal of those he cures, and also the dismissal at the end of Mass. Peace was Jesus' bequest to his disciples after the Last Supper. The second watchword is forgiveness, for God was always known as a God of mercy and forgiveness, as Jesus came to show by his constant approach to sinners. But the Lord's Prayer shows that if we do not ourselves forgive, we block God's forgiveness of ourselves too.

Question:

*'Forgiveness is the only sure path to peace.'
Does this cause any difficulties?*

The Most Holy Trinity

First reading:

The God of Love

(Deuteronomy 4.32-34, 39-40)

Why a reading from Deuteronomy on the feast of the Trinity? Because the Book of Deuteronomy is primarily about the love of God, the revelation of God's awesome, forgiving love to his people. Love is the nature of God. We can never understand God, or what we mean by three Persons in one nature. Rather than the Church giving us a reading that might get us a tiny step nearer understanding what we might mean by that, the Church gives us the heart of the revelation to Jews and Christians that God is love. Other religions feel their way towards this staggering and daunting truth, but to us it has been

revealed. The revelation of God as love is a personal revelation, inviting us to a response in love, inviting us into a personal relationship with God as love. All the instructions that God gives us are simply meant to show us what that love means and how we can respond to it and stay close to God as our own God's people. In the beginning man and woman were made in the image of God, and if I am to remain close to God I must shape my desires, my activities, my relationships to be like those of God.

Question:

Why do we pray to God through Jesus?

Second reading:

*Son, Father and Spirit
(Romans 8.14-17)*

The Trinity is often treated like a mathematical and philosophical problem. No attempt to understand the intra-Trinitarian relationships of the three Persons can get very far. The reading which the Church gives us, instead, gives an inkling of our triple relationship with God. The basis is Jesus' own prayer, in which he called God 'Abba', the dignified and affectionate word in Jesus' own language by which a son addressed his father. The staggering next move is that Jesus told us that we might use the same form of address; so we use it, even in Aramaic. It is, however, only because Christ has given us his Spirit as our spirit that we can do so. This Spirit is also the Spirit of the Father. Sometimes in the gospel it is Jesus, sometimes it is the Father who sends the Spirit. We can say that the Spirit gives us access to the Father and to the Son, or that the Father gives the Spirit of the Son, or that the Son gives us his Spirit. In this way, the Trinity, each Person in a different way, imparts to us the love of God and draws us into God's own love.

Question:

Why do we pray to God in the Spirit?

Gospel:

*Baptism into the Trinity
(Matthew 28.16-20)*

On a superficial level, this gospel reading seems chosen because of the Trinitarian baptismal formula. It is the only time this formula comes in the scripture, and it is remarkable that the Trinitarian liturgical formula was already developed while the New Testament was being written. At a deeper level, this reading of the final five verses of Matthew gives a wonderful Trinitarian view of the work of salvation. The words of the Risen Christ, 'all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me' are reminiscent of the vision of the exalted Son of Man in Daniel, who comes to the One of Great Age, seated on his throne, and receives from him all power on earth. Only Christ receives all power in heaven too, as 'the Son of God in power'. In this power, he sends out his disciples, promising his divine presence always. The promise of Christ's divine presence in his Church now, at the end of the gospel, balances the promise at the beginning in the name Emmanuel, given by the angel for the child. Emmanuel means 'God with us'. So the permanent presence of Christ is the message of the whole gospel.

Question:

If Christ is present in his Church, why is it so sinful?

The Most Holy Body and Blood of Christ

First reading:

*God's Covenant with his People
(Exodus 24.3-8)*

The first reading gives the story of the clinching of the Covenant on Mount Sinai, the moment when Israel became God's people, took on themselves the joyful obligations of the Law. The Law was God's gift to Israel, explaining what they must do to be his people. It was not a set of constricting obligations but a liberating set of instructions. Obedience to the Law was a response in love to a gift in love, to behave towards God with the generosity which God showed to his people. They must now behave towards others as God had behaved towards them, respecting the widow, caring for the orphan, welcoming the stranger. 'Be holy as I am holy', said the Lord. This reading is particularly apt at the Mass for Corpus Christi because, just like the Mass, it includes both instructions and sacrifice. In the first part of the Mass, we listen to God's revealing Word, which tells us in various ways how to behave if we are to be God's people. Only after committing ourselves to God's Word can we go on to join in the new alliance. That alliance, too, was celebrated by sharing a meal, for the communion sacrifices were a shared meal, and by sharing the blood, which is the life of Christ.

Question:

How does Christ nourish us in the Eucharist?

Second reading:

*The Blood of Christ
(Hebrews 9.11-15)*

Blood plays an important part in all three readings of this Mass, and it is essential to understand its function in both Israel's and our own sacra-mental system. Blood is an obvious symbol of life. Total loss of blood means total loss of life. As blood flows out, so life ebbs away. Therefore, just as life belongs to God, so blood belongs to God. In Israel, it is therefore sacred. In recognition that life is the gift of God, blood may not be consumed. Sacrifice in Israel was not appeasing an angry God, by offering the death of an animal instead of my own death. Rather, it was a joyful a sharing with God, the sharing of a meal, and the granting of new life. Death releases the blood, which can then be sprinkled over the offerers to symbolize fresh life from God. The Letter to the Hebrews contrasts the old sacrifices and old sharing of blood, 'the blood of goats and bull calves', with the gift of Christ's blood. How much more is the new life, given by the blood of the divine Son of God! This is the rich purpose of receiving the blood of Christ from the chalice.

Question:

What is the difference between the Christian and the pagan idea of sacrifice?

Gospel:

Baptism into the Trinity

(Matthew 28.16-20)

A New Partnership (Mark 14.12-16, 22-26)

The original, Old Testament covenant was sealed by a death and by the sharing of the blood between God (signified by the altar) and his people as a sign of new life. Israel broke that covenant by persistently refusing to keep true to the way of life which the covenant enshrined. Now Jesus' new covenant engages us in a new alliance and gives us new life. The story told in this reading is the warranty and guarantee that, each time we receive the Body and Blood of Christ, we are bound anew into his covenant. The story is told in almost exactly similar terms in each of

the first three gospels and in Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. It must have been learnt and repeated by heart. There is just enough difference to show that Mark and Matthew reflect the tradition of the Hebrew communities, while Paul and Luke reflect the tradition of the Greek-speaking communities. It must have been repeated again and again from the very first years of Christianity. Each time we repeat these words, we are re-entering Jesus' covenant. There should be a health warning. The Mass is dangerous: are you ready to commit yourself to the Kingdom, to engage in a new and personal alliance with Christ and to live with his life?

Question:

What obligations do we take on by receiving the Eucharist?