

Commentary on Sunday Scripture – Year C

21st Sunday of Ordinary Time

First reading:

(Isaiah 66.18-21)

Salvation to the Nations

The first and third readings today are both inspiring and daunting. The first reading comes from the very last chapter of Isaiah. Israel has returned from exile and settled down back in Jerusalem. It has outgrown the frantic worry about mere survival under threat of extinction and can afford to look outwards.

Just so, a sign of a child's maturity is when she or he grows less self-preoccupied and can begin to be aware of the needs of others. In the same way, Israel now sees that the vocation of the Chosen People is not to be turned in on itself, but to bring the Lord's salvation to others.

Isaiah prophesies that this wonderfully outlandish list of far distant lands, Tarshish, Put, Lud, Tubal and Javan, will come to draw salvation from Jerusalem, and will take part in Jerusalem's own sacred worship.

As Christians we believe that all nations will somehow be saved by Christ, even though they do not know him. 'Nor is God far distant from those who in shadows and images seek the unknown God', says the Constitution on the Church of Vatican II.

Question:

How can those who have never heard of Christ be saved by him? Is it by admitting the failure of human nature and our need to rely on someone else?

Second reading:

(Hebrews 12.5-7, 11-13)

The Discipline of Suffering

What is the sense of all the suffering in the world around us, the constant pain, worry, loneliness, fear, frustration? Is all this distortion and misery really compatible with the belief in a God of love? The Letter to the Hebrews here gives one explanation: it is the loving training and discipline of a father to bring us to peace. In a world without pain, would we ever turn to God? When all is going well, many of us can manage nicely without God! If our world falls apart, we need God to put it together again. Paul puts it slightly differently, seeing suffering as the privilege of sharing in Christ's own redemptive suffering. By enduring Christ's suffering in every age, the Church ensures that it truly is the body of Christ, the Servant of the Lord. But we can never be content with suffering. Jesus himself understood suffering, and he went out of his way to heal it in all its forms. We should also remember, that, in an age in which so many decry the selfishness and materialism of society, the generosity shown by so many for the alleviation of suffering, the care of the sick, the betterment of the underprivileged, is one of the signs of Christ at work in his society.

Question:

In what way is our faith different from that of the Old Testament figures?

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Gospel:

(Luke 13.22-30)

The Narrow Door

The gospel reading puts the point directly opposite to the first reading. There the inhabitants of distant lands will come to draw salvation from Jerusalem. This is repeated in the gospel, but the daunting corollary is also given to those nearer home and expecting to find their way in easily: don't sit back in complacent contentment that we have been called, or you may find the door slammed in your face.

Matthew 7.21-23 has the same warning: it is not enough to keep calling out, 'Lord, Lord!' without actually doing the will of the Father. He also has a similar, more developed parable of the wedding attendants, five wise with oil in their lamps, and five unprepared for the wedding feast. They too vainly cry, 'Lord, Lord!' from outside the door.

This is almost a centre piece of the instructions to the disciples as they make their way with Jesus up to Jerusalem and to his Passion and death. There is no cheap way in: each disciple must take up the cross behind Jesus and follow to the end of the road. This teaching is the more striking in Luke, who stresses that both Jews and gentiles will take part in the festival.

Question:

In that case, is a good pagan better off than a lukewarm Christian?
