

Sunday Homily

32ND SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

7 NOVEMBER 2021

YEAR B

DIVINE OFFICE WEEK IV

“Rain on the face of the earth.”

Illustration

It was a country road in Ireland fifty years ago. Sheep were being loaded into a lorry for market. In the glen an old woman stood at her farmhouse door, watching the operation. It was strange to her. She turned to her son and asked him what was happening. “They are loading sheep for market,” he told her. “Well, I have seen everything now,” the old woman replied. “It is no wonder that the young people will not walk a few miles to Mass on Sunday, when even the sheep are getting a lift into town!”

The old woman had walked everywhere during her long life. She walked her land to see to her cattle. She walked the road to Mass. She walked across bogland, eight miles to visit her relations by the sea. She was married for twenty years, and a widow for forty years. In that time she had struggled to bring up a family, in the days when Ireland was poor, and there was no social assistance to help. But she managed it.

She was a woman of great courage. Hardship and poverty had shaped her life. She was a strong character, and her voice was full of authority. Her family loved her – children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren. She was, to them, a great example of goodness, kindness and faith in God. When she died, they said of her, “Nan – she was mighty!”

Gospel Teaching

Sitting beside the Temple treasury today, Jesus catches sight of a widow. At the time Jesus is indulging in a spot of “people-watching”. It can be quite fascinating to see the variety of human beings passing by, and their differing styles. Religious officials in long robes make an impressive sight. People bow and make way for them. They are important people. Then the widow comes along. Nobody takes any notice of her. In fact, Jesus has to call the attention of his disciples to this nobody, dropping a few copper coins into the collection box. There is something he wants to say about this sight.

What Jesus says is quite startling. This woman has given more than anyone. It is a paradox. It is the very opposite of what appears to be happening. Jesus is telling us, “Look carefully at what is really going on here.” Well-to-do people are giving very generous donations to keep the system of religion going. This poor woman is placing her entire trust in God, because she has no one else to rely on. It is not the same activity at all.

The widow is teaching us a lesson from life. What money she has is very little, but she knows that money alone will not save her, or bring her comfort. Her life is in God's hands. She knows this. The disposition of her heart is to be generous. She trusts that God will not fail her. She prays for God's kingdom to come. She prays for daily bread. She prays for the grace to live in peace with others, and to be delivered from all evil.

Application

One day when Jesus was preaching to the people, a woman in the crowd was so impressed with him that she shouted out, "Blessed is the womb that bore you!" It was an early shout of praise for Mary, the mother of Jesus: Mary, the young girl of Nazareth, who also became a widow. It was a tribute to her womanly heart, and her motherly guidance of this eloquent preacher from Galilee.

In response to this cry, Jesus took the occasion to say, "Blessed are those who hear the word of God and keep it!" Our spiritual kinship with Jesus is even more important than the flesh-and-blood ties of earthly life. The Lord is reminding us that every day, as long as this today lasts, is a day to listen to what the Lord is saying to us. It is not for us to presume that we know everything there is to know. Each day is a day to grow in our knowledge and service of the Lord.

In times of hardship, in sad and sorrowful times, it is tempting to forget about the Lord. That is when we may need to listen to widows, those brave women who have known loss, and who have persevered in the love of God. "Jar of meal shall not be spent, jug of oil shall not be emptied, before the day when the Lord sends rain on the face of the earth."

Sunday Homily

33RD SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

14 NOVEMBER 2021

YEAR B

DIVINE OFFICE WEEK I

“Take the fig tree as a parable.”

Illustration

Throughout human history the art of storytelling has developed in many cultures as a way of keeping the past alive and comforting the people when the future looked bleak. Every country has its heroes and heroic stories.

An example of this can be found in the stories surrounding William Wallace, an early Scottish leader, who managed to unite the clans in their self-identity and rouse them to fight off the forces occupying his country. His short-lived rebellion was ultimately put down, yet even today his name continues to inspire a passion in his country, and the myths surrounding his achievements have grown with the centuries. A 1995 film, *Braveheart*, captures something of this, as Wallace rallies his small band of followers before a battle in which many of them will undoubtedly die. He convinces them that, in spite of the fate awaiting them, no one can take away their inner freedom.

Gospel Teaching

On some occasions a people or nation is called upon to stand up for the values it holds dear. This may cause hardship or even lead to wars in defence of human rights and religious freedoms. This was the position the Jewish people found themselves in when the book of Daniel was written. The writer sought to unite his people and offer them some solace. The faithful were under pressure from a military force, but also in a more insidious way, from the temptation to renounce their faith and blend into the crowd. Belief in the God of the Jews, and its corresponding way of life, did not seem politically correct in a world where expediency had replaced commitment. In every generation, the danger is that values remain valid only as long as those who shape public opinion deem them to be viable.

It is against this ever-changing landscape that Daniel proclaims the true destination of all our human longings. It is the Lord who has formed each of us for fullness of life with him.

Jesus of Nazareth would have been familiar with the imagery and comforting message of a bright new future, contained in the stories of his people and expressed in the book of Daniel, written about 150 years before his birth. He too lived in restless times under occupation. Yet, in a world much more connected to the earth and the changing of the seasons, Jesus talked about the signs of spring as an indication of our liberation. The words of today's Gospel were written to

reassure a Christian people suffering persecution that the end would come soon, heralded by great cosmic signs. The truth is that, as Jesus himself says, no one knows for sure when these things may occur, not even the Son of Man himself.

What is certain is that through one sure and final redemptive act, we are for ever set free from our burden of sin, and are offered the possibility of eternal life. The only price for people of faith is that they trust in the saving power of a God who calls them by name, and for the moment play their part in the divine author's plan for humanity.

Application

As we act out the human story of our time, can we discern similar attitudes to those faced by the Jews in the book of Daniel? On the whole our Western society seems unsure of itself. Some seem to be turning to superficial forms of spirituality that offer easy answers with no commitment. We have a choice: accept the prevailing culture and its attendant confusion, or be a people of vision, a people who attempt to discern the signs of the times for ourselves and the world around us. Christ offers us a chance to be truly free, to glimpse the future possibilities and present reality of his kingdom working in our world.

As a community of faith, we are called to go beyond the superficial, and be alert to our world in the light of Christ, knowing that he is already saving the world. As the Church, that does not mean always rushing to condemn those around us. Nor does it mean simply waiting for the end times. Perhaps we are called in some way to be the signs of his life and freedom here and now, even if that means swimming against the tide. Discerning his presence means highlighting and supporting the good that we detect in our world. And, with his help, planting the seeds of hope around us that they might flower into the presence of God in our midst.

Sunday Homily

OUR LORD JESUS CHRIST, KING OF THE UNIVERSE

21 NOVEMBER 2021

YEAR B

DIVINE OFFICE WEEK II

“Jesus... made us a line of kings,
priests to serve his God and Father.”

Illustration

There is a mid-fourteenth-century English poem called *The Pearl* in which a man's only daughter dies before she is two years old. He wanders about in the garden where she is buried, unable to control his grief. Then he has a vision where he sees a river, and, beyond it, a beautiful flowery garden in which a young woman is seated. This is his daughter, now grown to maturity. She chides him for missing her, for she is enjoying the delights of heaven. She explains that she is now a heavenly queen. “How can that be?” he asks. The Virgin Mary, she explains, is the Queen of courtesy, while she is queen by the courtesy of God, like all the blessed in heaven: all are kings and queens.

This idea is reflected in one of the traditions of the Orthodox Church. In their weddings, the bride and groom have crowns, or *stefana*, held above their heads, signifying the glory and honour with which God crowns them. In another example, at the end of the Narnia Chronicles by C.S. Lewis, generally recognised as Christian allegory, the central characters, the children, are given crowns.

Gospel Teaching

The image of the king and monarchy is a powerful one. In biblical times, monarchs in the countries around Israel were held to represent gods on earth, or at least to be intermediaries between the people and their gods. Many, such as the Pharaohs in Egypt, were despotic tyrants. God wanted the chosen people to govern themselves differently and, in the Old Testament, we see that God was at first reluctant to let the Israelite people have kings. However, they were allowed first Saul, and after him David, then Solomon. Following Solomon, the country divided, and kingship began to diminish in importance until it was eventually replaced. Temple priests and the people as a whole became the intermediaries, inheriting the promises God had made to the kings. The hope was kept alive, however, that one day a priestly king would arise who could lead his people back to the true faith in God.

Christ was recognised by his faithful as that special king, but human categories are never enough to describe the workings of God. What Christ inaugurated was no simple earthly monarchy, but the messianic age itself. This age, this kingdom, will one day be fully and completely brought about by Christ's second coming. Often during Mass we make the acclamation “Christ has died” – using the past

tense as an event in history; “Christ is risen” – as an ever-present event; and “Christ will come again” – a hope for the future. But it is not an entirely future experience. Because Christ came into the world, as a baby in Bethlehem, and because he rose from death at the first Easter, that kingdom is a reality in our world, and elements of it are discernible even now. All truth, all genuine love and all sincere compassion are signs of that kingdom in the here and now. This feast today, on the last Sunday in the Church’s year, is a bridge between the two greatest celebrations in the calendar – Easter and Christmas – drawing them together with a reminder of Christ the King, bringer-in of the kingdom where all will be given crowns.

Application

The first reading today describes the people in the kingdom as being servants of God. The second, like the medieval poem, depicts them as kings. But there is really no difference between the two images. The servant-king is the most apt description of Christ, the “first fruits” of all who enter the kingdom. To be a servant-king is what inspires the Christian life. What are the characteristics of a servant-king? Well, in the play *Macbeth*, Shakespeare makes a list of qualities of kingship, or “king-becoming graces” as he calls them: “justice, verity, temperance, stableness, bounty, perseverance, mercy, lowliness, devotion, patience, courage, fortitude”. Quite a standard to live up to – but nothing that should be beyond the capacity of each and every Christian who aspires to wear the heavenly crown.

This sort of kingship helps to describe how our dominion, or kingly rule, is to be exercised over creation. We are told at the beginning of Genesis that we have been given dominion, or kingly rule, over all other creatures. To be tyrants like Pharaoh? No. To be servants, like Christ. This is the challenge with which we are presented. The kingdom of which Christ is king seeks only the genuine happiness of others.

Sunday Homily

1ST SUNDAY OF ADVENT

28 NOVEMBER 2021

YEAR C

DIVINE OFFICE WEEK I

“And then they will see the Son of Man
coming in a cloud with power and great glory.”

Illustration

Today's scripture readings seem to come from another world. Jeremiah looks forward to honesty and integrity in the land. Paul expects us to live a completely blameless life. And Jesus speaks of a day when “the powers of heaven will be shaken”. Jeremiah and Paul, and even Jesus himself, may appear so much concerned with another world that they seem irrelevant to the world in which we actually live today.

Nothing could be further from the truth! Their world was as disordered as ours. Jeremiah preached as the Babylonian armies began their destruction of Jerusalem. Paul wrote when the first Christians were beginning to despair under the pressure of persecution. And Jesus' words are his last before his passion. Their message was for a world like ours.

But how, in the midst of such chaos and suffering, could the visions of today's readings be recognised as real and relevant? The answer is illustrated in the lesson given in a simple way by an elderly lady in a nursing home. She had been paralysed for years but had retained the use of her hands. With these hands she produced the most beautiful embroidery one could ever wish to see. One day she showed a visitor her latest creation, a beautiful pattern of flowers and birds. “This”, she said, “is the way God sees our world: a thing of beauty, ordered and harmonious.”

Then, reversing the material, she showed the other side: the little tufts and loose ends, the irregular patterns. “And this”, she added, “is the world we see: disordered, problems unresolved, questions unanswered. But it will not always be like this. Next time you come I will have tidied up that side too and it will be as good as the other. This is what God will do at the end of time. God will tidy up what human beings have disturbed, and put right what has gone wrong.”

Gospel Teaching

Jesus Christ taught us to look at the world through his own eyes – the eyes of God. When we look at the world using our own eyes we can be filled with confusion. But using Christ's vision we recognise something ordered and beautiful. We see a purpose in life; we are given true insight. The necessary “tidying up” comes, of course, at the end of time when the Son of Man appears “with power and great glory”, but the picture can already be recognised.

The season of Advent prepares us to look at the world through Christ's eyes: it prepares us for his coming into our life in a richer and more realistic way. Sometimes we think that we prepare by ignoring the world we live in; or we imagine that the difficulties of this life are somehow an obstacle between ourselves and God. But Christ makes it plain that we prepare for his coming precisely by taking a searching look at *this* world and perceiving, through the disorder, the guiding hand of God. With Christ's insight we can enjoy the vision of Jeremiah and Paul: we can recognise that God is truly with us.

Application

How can we absorb that assurance of God's presence enjoyed by Jeremiah and Paul? How can we learn to look at the world through Christ's eyes? These are tasks for life. But Advent is a time set aside to stop and reflect in a special way on how Christ comes into our life.

First, Advent directs us to the birth of Christ in Bethlehem. Our faith is not founded on feelings or emotions. It is founded on one clear fact: that in the birth of Jesus Christ, God came into the world as a human being.

Second, Advent directs our attention to Christ's coming in our everyday life. He comes when we least expect him: in the awkward person we have to deal with; when we are feeling unwell and are tired with the difficulties of life. Our daily prayer helps us to prepare for those moments.

Finally, Advent directs us to Christ's coming for the last time – the "day [that] will be sprung on you suddenly, like a trap". If we have contemplated his coming at Christmas and in our daily life, this final coming will be no fearful scanning of the horizon, hoping we will not be caught unawares. On the contrary, it will be a welcoming of a God who has been as close to us as he is in our celebration of the Eucharist: a God with whom we have been in such close communion that we have learned to see the world through his eyes.