

Some reflections on the readings for this coming Sunday, the Third Sunday before Advent

Dear brothers and sisters,

As on All Saints' Day, which we celebrated last Sunday, we are reminded again this Sunday and throughout this final month of the Church year that no Christian is, or can be, solitary. Through baptism we become members one of another in Christ, members of a company of saints whose mutual belonging transcends human and personal differences, distinctions, and even death. Our transformation into Christ is a work of God's grace. There is nothing for us to do beyond what Christ has already done for us. This is a time to be thankful for the sheer grace that can shape a human life, our lives included, as we reflect on the example of the saints whose holiness and Christlikeness grew out of the ordinary circumstances and the sometimes extraordinary crises involved in being human on planet Earth. Our role as Christians is to follow them by participating with our hearts and lives in the work of Jesus Christ.

Jonah 3: 1 – 5 & 10

The book of Jonah is unique among the prophetic books in that it is in the form of a story rather than a collection of prophetic sayings. The person and the story are fictitious; but the message to the first readers reflects a real-life issue. It is about the state of the nation's relationship with God in the fourth century BC. The Israelites, having been restored to their homeland after the years of exile were becoming rather comfortable and sure of themselves, unforgiving, exclusive, anti-foreigner, insisting that only they could be saved. But in fact, they were running away from ways and will of God. Jonah is presented as a symbol of this people. The Ninevites symbolise all gentiles who were more than ready to respond to the call of the God of Israel and repent of their transgressions. The serious message is that Jonah (Israel) had not grasped God's inclusive love and tender mercy. Although not in the scope of our passage today, Jonah becomes indignant when the Ninevites have a change of heart and are given a second chance, just as he was when he disobeyed God. In our criticisms of others are we willing to offer the forgiveness that has been shown to us? If not, perhaps we should cease praying the Lord's Prayer!

Psalms 62: 5 – 12

This psalm is a prayer of confidence in God's protection. The theme of rock, stronghold, fortress as symbols of God's protection is no doubt prompted by the prevalence of such features in the lands of the Bible.

Hebrews 9: 24 – 28

This anonymous letter's emphasis on ritual suggests that it was addressed principally to Jewish priestly converts to Christianity who still missed the splendour of the Temple worship and its sacrifices, ineffectual though they were. The priests of the Jerusalem Temple believed that the Temple itself was a model of heaven. A model is not the real thing, so the rituals of the Temple could only ever be a rehearsal or preparation for the final sacrifice that was supposed to do away with all sin. The writer of Hebrews is saying that Jesus is that sacrifice and that he has entered the real heaven, not the model or miniature human version. What he has achieved is the real thing, the removal of sin once and for all and of any separation the readers believed existed between God and themselves. For us who are far removed from the experience and motives of Temple ritual and sacrifices, we should know that the

life, death and resurrection of Christ should have removed any notion among us that there is anything we can do in this life to draw God closer to us. It is always for us to draw closer to God. For God has always loved us and all humanity completely and unconditionally. Our worship and offering of ourselves to God can only be a response of thanksgiving for such love and grace. It is no surprise that Thanksgiving (Eucharist) is the name of our principal act of worship.

Mark 1: 14 – 20

Jesus begins his ministry by calling his first disciples. He calls them to radical change, change of life and lifestyle, a separation from their past life but using their learned skills in a new way – from catching fish to catching people. However, it is notable that Jesus chose his disciples, rather than their choosing him, so he accepts the responsibility of looking after them. He calls two pairs of brothers, which would enable mutual support. Later in the Gospel he sends the disciples out in pairs. There is a suggestion here that following Christ is not and cannot be undertaken alone. Christianity is always a community faith where we give and receive the support of our fellow Christians. What is required is the personal radical change and conversion that the first disciples experienced. How has being a Christian changed your life? How do your convictions, priorities and world view differ from the non-Christians you know?

A prayer for this final month of the Church year:

Almighty and eternal God, you have kindled the flame of love in the hearts of the saints: grant to us the same faith and power of love, that, as we rejoice in their triumphs, we may be sustained by their example and fellowship; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

Wishing you every blessing for Sunday and the week ahead.

With my love and prayers,

John