

THE LENTEN WORD

The First Week

Monday I Am The Lord!

Leviticus 19: 1-2, 11-18; Mt 25:31-46

In the readings today we remember who is *really* the Lord. Leviticus gives us the true taste of the Commandments, with the voice of God thundering the demands of justice - based not on some human taste for decency, but on the simple premise: *I AM THE LORD!*

In Matthew's great set-piece of the Last Judgment, Jesus goes even further. When judgment is passed on us, *we will all be shocked*; none of us will be able to predict the verdict of the court. Our own opinion will be immaterial; Jesus will judge us by how we responded when he came to us in the disguise of the poor, the needy, the homeless, the imprisoned, and the sick. Don't be sentimental today about them. Think of the dirty tramp reeking of alcohol, the justly-sentenced crook, the possessed, compulsive addict, the shamed and the refused and the disqualified of the earth. *Who is it who looks out of those eyes? What do they see? What do we see? Does either of us see the truth?*

Tuesday God's Word In Us

Is 55:10-11; Mt 6:7-15

God's Word accomplishes what it was sent to do; and there are few words of God so often on our lips as those of the Lord's Prayer. I think that we should recognise today the *dangerous* nature of these words which we are letting ourselves say. The prayer for God's name to be honoured can do us little harm, *if we belong to him*. To pray that his kingdom may come is, however, unsafe, unless we are (a) poor or (b) persecuted for the sake of justice or (c) children or (d) friends of the above; because theirs is the kingdom of heaven, and those who aren't like them can't come in. To pray that the will of God may be done on earth is perilous, unless we find our will coinciding with his; speaking personally, I find the will of God often agonisingly different from my own; and I am in (Gethsemane) good company. Praying for our daily bread is asking to be taken into God's providence; it *will* be sufficient, but it might not be the fashion to which we've become accustomed. The lines about forgiveness are amplified by Jesus in today's Gospel: asking for forgiveness means a total surrender of our own anger, desire for revenge, and grudge. How do you feel? Finally, we pray not to be tested, but to be saved from evil. . .and that, I think, is the sincerest response to the foregoing! Remember that this is our prayer. But it is *also the Word of God*, which does not fail to carry out what it was sent to do. So we will pray it; but only with the utmost caution!

Wednesday Jonah Preached - Nineveh Listened

Jonah 9:1-10, Lk 11:29-32

Sometimes, when the Word is truly spoken, people truly listen. The Word of God has an authority which cannot be silenced. When Jesus told the young man to sell his wealth for the poor, and to come with him on the missions, he didn't say "Get lost!" *He went away sad*, because he knew he was walking away from the Word. So with Jonah: he spoke the word, and the decision was left to Nineveh - and Nineveh, incredibly, *repented!* Jonah then felt a fool, and began to sulk; but the Word of God is truly greater than our assessment of it, and we must all of us receive it, and observe it, with humility. If not, those who have observed it will stand up to judge us: because we have heard it from Christ, and our reason to obey is therefore greater than that of Nineveh.

Thursday Who Do You Think I Am?

Est 4:17, Mt 7:7-12

The way we pray to, and think about, God would sometimes imply terrible beliefs in us. Do we think of God as cruel, unfeeling, forgetful? Do we pray as if he were vengeful and careless? It's part of the mystery of evil: we forget how to think of God, in a world so prone to be dreadful; sometimes we assume that God too is dreadful, and we express this when we turn to other helpers, other expedients, to get us out of our jams. Today Queen Esther prays into the darkness, trusting God to find the way; and Jesus tells us to be more resolutely kind to God; "If you, well-known rotters, at least know how to be kind to your children, do you think that God, the uttermost love, will be *less* kind?" I know for certain that many people do - the ones who call death by earthquake "an act of God" and who piously identify *only* the very worst news as "the will of God". The conclusion of Jesus is that we should pray out of our faith in the goodness of God, leaving all the room round our prayer that is needed for his perfect will, not ours, to be done.

Friday

It's You

Ezkl 18:21-28; Mt 5:20-26

The Jews sometimes thought that sin was something you could inherit; that sons would carry the guilt of their fathers and grandfathers, and be punished and harried to the grave for it. It's true that one generation's sin can poison the world the next generation inherits; but Ezekiel explains that every person has to make his decision about God, and goodness, and holiness: for, or against. Every person will have the same challenge, and freedom, to choose life. To read that, and then to hear the demanding words of Jesus from the Sermon on the Mount, gives our decisions and choices today their proper weight. Today you're free. Which way will you go? At any rate, *take it seriously*; this day will never be lived through again; life is not a trial run; you're making history, and this is the final version!

Saturday

And This Is Me.

Dt 26:16-19; Mt 5:43-48

Deuteronomy reminds us what hopes God has for us to inherit. Matthew reminds us what it will mean for us to live as children of such a God. Again we hear the note of holiness: found your measure of kindness on God, not on your little idea of what you can get by with! Human beings may acquit you of blame, and find you very acceptable; but remember what God has done for you, and revise your estimate of how you are responding. The tough word today is "perfect" before the evil of the world; and that not in the eyes of other people, but in the eyes of your heavenly Father.

Preparing for the Second Sunday of Lent

Mt 17:1-9

The Gospel of the Transfiguration bids us lift our eyes to the glory on the face of Christ. Without faltering, the Lenten liturgy is impelling us forward, to sense the urgency and power of God's call as it unfolds - for Jesus, who will soon climb a harder hill than this one: and also for us, who must learn to *listen to him* who is the beloved of the Father. "*If anyone wants to follow me. . .*" The Lenten liturgy is urging us to hear with new depth what the Father is saying. We cannot know the results that will follow, if we obey.

"My dear children, we are already the children of God; what we are to be in the future has not yet been revealed. All we know is, that, when it is revealed, we shall be like Him, for we

shall see him as he is. Surely anyone who has this hope must purify himself, to try to be as pure as Christ.” -1Jn 3:2-3