

19th Sunday (C)

7th August 2022

‘By Faith ...’

Wis 18: Passover night: expecting God to save the virtuous and ruin their enemies

Heb 11: *by faith ... by faith ... by faith ...*

Lk 12: 32–48: ready and waiting for the Master’s return

Some weeks the teaching from the readings is very uniform — each one dovetails nicely into the other, there is a clear and simple message, one ‘theme’ which comes out of all the readings. But I don’t think that’s the case today. The 1st reading is at first sight rather obscure (the Passover expectations of the Hebrew people). The 2nd reading seems to end abruptly mid-chapter/mid-course. And the Gospel passage moves strangely between instructions on almsgiving and instructions to be ready for the Master’s return. Of course there’s no need for the readings to be ‘straitjacketed’ into one theme — Sacred Scripture is wide and varied, as varied as the ways in which God has spoken to His people; at some point God will speak to us through one phrase, at other times through another. God is not narrow and channelled, and nor is His Word. It is abundant, wide-cast, rich and overflowing. But on a Sunday morning for the preacher, it can generate the

awkward question ... Just where to begin!

For me, the highlight of the readings today without doubt is the *second reading*, from Hebrews. This is from ch. 11, about one third of the chapter. The effect of the whole chapter is much more striking; perhaps think of reading the whole of Hebrews 11 later on. The chapter has a whole *litany* of OT figures: not just Abraham and Sarah mentioned here in the passage we heard, but also Abel, Enoch, and Noah; Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, (the list goes on ...). And the constant refrain of the chapter is, “By faith ...” (18x we hear it!) “By faith” so-and-so did such-and-such an extraordinary thing for love of God. This whole list of Old Testament witnesses testifies to the strength of faith; they were, all of them, “weak people who were given strength.” Much of what they were each hoping for still lay so far in the future: the fulfilment of God’s promises was ahead (centuries ahead) awaiting the coming of Jesus Christ; these OT patriarchs and prophets were not to see all this, and yet they walked by faith.

This faith that they exemplify, we are urged to

imitate. In another translation, the opening words of this chapter of Hebrews are more succinctly put: “*faith is the assurance of things hoped for; the conviction of things not seen.*” Faith is about trusting to be true and life-giving what we often don’t experience directly. For faith we also rely on the accumulated wisdom of the Church, Scripture, and the saints, and fellow Christians around us; we trust in God because it makes sense of our life, rather than because we necessarily always feel it through our senses.

Let’s think of an illustration. Supposing you go to a historic monument: a castle, or a ruined monastery, or some Roman remains ... all you might see is a few low walls, the barest outline of the building, a ditch or hump or two. (When a group of us went in April to St Albans, we did just that: we saw not only the intact shrine of the Roman-era martyr, but also the paltry remains of the great mediaeval monastery, and also the Roman-era city walls and theatre.) If you visit a monument and see just a few ruins, then if you thought that was it, that’s all there was, you’d probably think the monument was spectacularly

boring, leave promptly and wonder why you’d ever bothered coming to see it; ... but if instead you took the time to get the guidebook, or borrow the audio-guide, then you can start to see how it all fits together: ‘ah yes, the great hall was there; and the courtyard here, and the chapel there, and there was a lovely high ceiling here, and the decoration there must have been splendid’ ... little by little the whole splendour of the place comes to life in your mind’s eye.

Faith, I think, can be thought of as like that: the ability to see with your mind’s eye what *splendour* God has given to this world over and above the small amount that we can actually see. The guidebook to this world is what Scripture teaches; the audio-guide is what the Church never ceases to preach: it sets out for us the truth of the invisible world, the spiritual reality which is God, and our soul, and heaven. Only knowing and understanding the invisible — the spiritual — makes sense of the material, the visible. Without that spiritual insight of faith, the visible remains only partially, and unsatisfactorily,

comprehensible. God's grandeur is so much greater than the merely visible, splendid though that can sometime be in the beauty of the natural world. What comes with faith, though, is so much more beautiful. It reminds me of a saying of the beatified scientist, Bl. Neils Stensen, a Danish anatomist and the founding father of geology, later a Catholic bishop — he said, "That which we can see is beautiful; more beautiful is that which we know; and the most beautiful is that which as yet we do not know."

The continual struggle for us on earth, I guess, is the temptation to rely only on our senses, to ignore the 'guidebook' to what we cannot see, even though only that fuller picture that we do not see really make sense of what we do see. All too many people in the world are willing to do this, to ignore what's really there, and to live a 1-dimensional life. This is like just living among the ruins, and not grasping the whole vibrant life that is actually there! We must resist all such influences, by reminding ourselves continually of what Christ has said and done; what Scripture proclaims about God's love; what the

Church teaches century after century; and what the saints who have gone before us, and who live around us today, live out. This is what faith is, the determination not to be lax, not to be tempted away from this more splendid and realistic vision. Faith is knowing that although the Master has not yet returned — as the Gospel passage says — and although He is not yet in *sight* in the glory of His majesty, yet He will do so, and to ignore Him who cannot yet be seen is to be very foolish.

We are, as practising Christians, you might say, those whom the Lord says "have been given a great deal on trust." Yes, we have been given a gift of faith — a precious gift of trust — and much, therefore is demanded of us. We must live by faith and not by sight, yes, and we must also be those who 'promote the audio-guide,' who are convinced, and convincing to others, that the greater reality, the God-given reality of this world, is a vision that alone delights the human soul and allows us to walk not 'amongst the ruins' on this earth but instead in the splendid and welcoming mansions of the Lord of hosts.