

BIBLE SUNDAY 2013: SCRIPTURE NEWSLETTER INSERTS

Written by Fr David Gibbons, Centre for Catholic Formation,
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INTRODUCTION

One of the most important changes in the present Order of Mass was the restoration of an adequate Word of God, as the Liturgy of the Word. Moreover, this was a popular change: there is a deep thirst among parishioners for understanding the Sacred Scriptures, which provide substantial – indeed, essential – nourishment for our spiritual pilgrimage.

However, the Scriptures are not always readily comprehended by those at Mass, even when missalettes or readings sheets are used. The Priest celebrant can give a brief introduction to the readings, but something a little more ample and explanatory is required. It is helpful if this is in written form, which is easier for people to understand than in verbal form.

Accordingly, **these ‘Today’s Mass’ inserts are offered for each Sunday and Holy Day.** They attempt both to elucidate the context of each Reading and to apply them to our daily lives. You are welcome to copy and paste the inserts directly into your Sunday Newsletter. They are not copyright, but it would be appreciated if you were to retain the authorship line and web link.

Sunday 1st December 2013: Today’s Mass: the First Sunday of Advent

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By Fr David Gibbons, Centre for Catholic Formation, Archdiocese of Southwark

Today is the first day of the Church’s liturgical year. It is also the beginning of Year A in the Sunday Lectionary, the Year of Matthew (that is to say, most of the Gospel readings at Sunday Mass this year are taken from St Matthew’s Gospel). Advent is the season when we prepare to celebrate Christmas, the annual remembering of Christ’s coming into the world. In Advent we also direct our minds to His second coming. It is no surprise, then, that these are the themes of today’s Readings.

The First Reading – like so many in Advent – is taken from the prophecy of Isaiah, although rather mysteriously almost the same words are found in Micah 4: 1-3. It is a vision of the restoration of the Temple in Jerusalem (i.e. the restoration of true worship of God) and of peace among the nations. Christ’s coming ushered in this new age, and this vision should inspire us to work for true worship of God and for world peace. The Psalm continues the same themes.

In the Second Reading St Paul – using the imagery of night turning to day – tells us that as Christians we now live in the new age (of Christ) and should behave accordingly: we should “wake up now” and live in the light of Christ.

In the Gospel Jesus compares His second coming to Noah’s flood: it will be sudden and unexpected; some will be taken and others left (some will be saved and others not); so we must “stay awake” and always be prepared to account for ourselves at the Day of Judgement.

Sunday 8th December 2013: Today's Mass: the Second Sunday of Advent

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By Fr David Gibbons, Centre for Catholic Formation, Archdiocese of Southwark

First Reading: Isaiah predicts the coming of the Messiah – who will be of the line of David (which is what “from the stock of Jesse” means) - and lists the gifts he will have. These gifts are remarkably similar to six of the seven-fold gifts of the Spirit. He will also bring in an age of peace.
Note to readers: the sc in 'scion' is pronounced as in 'scientist'.

The Psalm is one of the psalms known as royal psalms, and continues the First Reading's foretelling of the Messiah, who will be king and saviour.

Characteristically, in the Second Reading St Paul suggests a practical outcome of our belief in Christ, namely that we should treat each other as Christ has treated us. In this way will glory be given to God.

Gospel: the great Advent figure of St John the Baptist appears. He is the last of the Old Testament prophets, preaching repentance and dressing like Elijah. He is also the first New Testament saint, preparing a way for Christ. Like the Baptist we too should prepare a way for Christ, both for Him to come into our own lives and also for other people to receive the good news of Christ.

On Monday we observe the Solemnity of The Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary, a principal patron of our diocese. The Mass Readings emphasise the role of Mary, mother of the Saviour, in the history of our salvation.

Sunday 15th December 2013: Today's Mass: the Third Sunday of Advent

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By Fr David Gibbons, Centre for Catholic Formation, Archdiocese of Southwark

First Reading: although this third extract from the prophecy of Isaiah will give hope and courage to those who are downhearted or restricted in some way, when Isaiah refers to the blind, the lame., etc, he is talking of the whole community. The Christian sees this prophecy fulfilled in Christ, who came to restore us, as a community of faith, to wholeness and integrity. As is usually the case, the Psalm picks up the same theme as the First Reading.

Second Reading: St James says that like a farmer we must be patient as we wait for Christ's second coming. In the Bible the idea of harvest is often used as a picture for the Day of Judgement. We should wait patiently for this day and not make judgements ourselves about other people.

Gospel: John the Baptist sends his disciples to find out who Jesus is, if He truly is the Messiah. Jesus tells them to look at the evidence of their own eyes.

The point He is making in the final sentence of this Gospel is that in the coming kingdom of God the little ones who believe in Jesus Christ will have the same standing as an important figure such as John.

Sunday 22nd December 2013: Today's Mass: the Fourth Sunday of Advent
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By Fr David Gibbons, Centre for Catholic Formation, Archdiocese of Southwark

The First Reading contains Isaiah's famous prediction of the virgin birth of the Messiah. In fact, there is much debate about this, and much scholarly ink has been used, mainly over whether the word translated as 'maiden' means a virgin or not. However, it is perfectly acceptable for us to interpret the words in the same way as Matthew does in the Gospel. In its Isaiah context, the prophet is attacking King Ahaz for entering into an alliance with foreign powers instead of putting his trust in God; but God will send this sign to ensure that the dynasty of David will endure.

The man referred to in verses 2 and 3 of the Psalm is often taken to refer to King David and bringing the Ark into Jerusalem.

The Second Reading is from the beginning of St Paul's letter to the Church in Rome. The good news is that Jesus, a "descendant of David", is both human and divine.

Gospel: Matthew depicts God's preparations for the birth and explains how this fits in with scripture, quoting the verse from Isaiah in today's First Reading. Notice how prominent Joseph is in this story: God takes the initiative in offering his grace, but we humans must make an active response. Although the term 'virgin birth' is often used, a more accurate term to designate Jesus' birth is 'virginal conception'. This idea, which both Matthew and Luke stress, helps us to understand Jesus as divine, the Son of God, but also as the long predicted Messiah, who must be born into the house of David (to which Joseph belonged).

Wednesday is the Solemnity of The Nativity of the Lord (or 'Christmas' as we usually call it, which means 'Christ's Mass'). There is a different set of Readings for each of the Masses: the Vigil Mass on Christmas Eve, the Midnight Mass, Mass at Dawn, and Mass during the Day.

Sunday 29th December 2013: Today's Mass: the Holy Family of Jesus, Mary and Joseph
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By Fr David Gibbons, Centre for Catholic Formation, Archdiocese of Southwark

The First Reading expands the commandment to honour one's father and mother. We should obey them when we are children and care for them when they are old.

The Psalm gives voice to the great blessing a happy and holy family is.

In his customary way St Paul in the Second Reading spells out some of the practical implications for those families whose members are baptised followers of Christ. This Reading would be a good one for families to read and discuss together.

The Gospel recounts the flight of the holy family into Egypt, in fulfilment of the scriptures. Even for the holy family life was not plain sailing!

This is a very timely Feast. We all know that family life is under such great pressure these days. As Christians we must do all we can both to stand up for family life in our modern society— since the family is the basic cell of society according to the way established by God for human beings – and put these teachings into practice (as best we can) in our own families.

Wednesday is the Solemnity of Mary, Mother of God. The Second Reading and Gospel portray Mary as the Mother of Jesus. The First Reading also contains the Aaronic Blessing from Numbers, for the New Year, while the Gospel also references Jesus' circumcision and naming, a week after his birth.

Sunday 5th January 2014: Today's Mass: the Epiphany of the Lord
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By Fr David Gibbons, Centre for Catholic Formation, Archdiocese of Southwark

The Feast of The Epiphany is one of the most important in the Church's year. It doesn't just recall the visit of the wise men to the baby Jesus: the real significance is the manifestation of Jesus to the world (the Gentiles); it also references the baptism of Jesus and the first miracle at Cana.

First Reading: the prophet Isaiah pictures salvation coming to the nations like light in the darkness but – and this is the important point – only by way of Israel, the people of God. The reference to camels and gold and incense is inevitably seen as a prediction of the visit of the magi as recounted in the Gospel.

Psalm: again this 'royal psalm' is seen as a prediction of, and celebration in song of, the visit of the wise men.

Second Reading: the Church has selected this extract from the letter to the Ephesians to underline the main significance of the Epiphany, that is the revelation of Jesus Christ as the Saviour of the Gentiles (or 'pagans') as well as the Jews.

Gospel: Matthew wonderfully relates the visit of the magi (or 'wise men') to Jesus in Bethlehem, bringing their three gifts: gold for a king, frankincense for God, and myrrh for the Anointed One, the Messiah. We Three Kings of Orient Are - the famous hymn by John H Hopkins Jr - brings out well the deeper meaning of the gifts.

Sunday 12th January 2014: Today's Mass: the Baptism of the Lord
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By Fr David Gibbons, Centre for Catholic Formation, Archdiocese of Southwark

First Reading: Isaiah describes the true servant of God and of the community. The Church has always seen here a portrait of Christ, especially in the reference to the servant as "covenant of the people and light of the nations".

The Psalm is a majestic hymn of praise to the Lord, the God of thunder and the water. It is a reminder of the use of water by God in our salvation, from creation through Noah and the Flood, the Exodus, and on to Christ's (and our) Baptism.

Second Reading: St Peter, in his sermon to Cornelius and his household (who significantly are Gentiles, not Jews), tells them about Jesus' ministry and how it began with His Baptism.

Gospel: Jesus is baptised in the river Jordan by John (who tries to dissuade Jesus, because he understood that Jesus, the sinless one, did not need Baptism, but Jesus insists), and this marks the beginning of Our Lord's public ministry.

This is one of the rare times in all scripture when the three persons of the Holy Trinity appear together. This reminds us that at our own Baptism we were baptised in the name of the Three Persons of the Godhead.

Sunday 19th January 2014: Today's Mass: Second Sunday of Ordinary Time
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By Fr David Gibbons, Centre for Catholic Formation, Archdiocese of Southwark

First Reading: Isaiah is himself a prefiguring of Jesus Christ, as the servant of God who will restore the people of God (the "tribes of Jacob") and be the light of the nations.

Psalm: the earliest Christians understood this psalm as a prophecy about the coming of the Messiah, which foreshadows the self-offering of Jesus Christ.

Second Reading: this is the beginning of a sequence of Second Readings taken from St Paul's first letter to the Church in Corinth. The greeting, used many times by St Paul, is the basis for the second form of the greeting said by the Priest at the beginning of Mass, Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Gospel: John the Baptist testifies to Jesus as the Lamb of God and as the Messiah, who has been anointed by the Spirit. The Invitation to Communion at Mass ("Behold the Lamb of God ...") directly quotes these words of the Baptist. These are familiar words and images, but one could spend a long time pondering their meaning.

Sunday 26th January 2014: Today's Mass: Third Sunday of Ordinary Time
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By Fr David Gibbons, Centre for Catholic Formation, Archdiocese of Southwark

First Reading: this is the passage of scripture referred to in today's Gospel, in which Matthew emphasises that Jesus will fulfil this prophecy in His mission to the Gentiles.

The Psalm is a simple and confident hymn of trust in the Lord.

Second Reading: St Paul urges the Corinthians to avoid different parties within the Church and tells them to unite around Christ. This is an important text when we have just observed the Octave for Christian Unity.

Year A is the Year of Matthew, and from today onwards the Sunday Gospels work through the First Gospel, allowing the main themes and emphases of Matthew to emerge. In today's Gospel Jesus begins His public ministry. First He fulfils scripture by bringing light into darkness and begins His preaching with the message of repentance, then He calls the four fishermen to be His disciples, and finally He begins preaching and teaching, and healing.

Sunday 2nd February 2014: Today's Mass: the Presentation of the Lord
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By Fr David Gibbons, Centre for Catholic Formation, Archdiocese of Southwark

Today we take a break from the Sundays in Ordinary Time and keep the Feast known as Candlemas. Mass begins with a Procession or Solemn Entrance, at which lit candles are blessed and sprinkled with holy water. We then process into Church, reciting the canticle Nunc Dimittis and its antiphon. The Penitential Act is omitted, and Mass continues with the Gloria. Please extinguish your candle when you sit for the Readings.

First Reading: the prophet Malachi prophesies about the Lord entering the Temple, whose offering will purify the people.

The Psalm is from an old Hebrew Entrance Liturgy, and expresses in hymn form the entrance of the Lord into the Temple.

Second Reading: the letter to the Hebrews expresses the deeper meaning of today's Feast, namely that Jesus Christ alone, as a human being but without sin, is the true High Priest, whose sacrifice alone can make atonement for our sins.

Gospel: in accordance with Jewish law, Jesus is presented in the Temple. Simeon responds with the canticle we call the Nunc Dimittis and Anna responds by praising God. Thus Jesus is revealed as the light to the nations and as the one who will deliver the people (although the way of suffering is not the way they were expecting).

Sunday 9th February 2014: Today's Mass: Fifth Sunday of Ordinary Time
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By Fr David Gibbons, Centre for Catholic Formation, Archdiocese of Southwark

First Reading: if we, as the Church, engage in what nowadays we would term social justice – and this is an important theme in the Old Testament prophets – then we will enable God's saving grace to be available to those who need it.

The Psalm continues the idea that if the good or just person puts God's virtues into practice he or she will be a light in the darkness.

Second Reading: it seems that the Corinthians did not think highly of Paul's speaking abilities, but Paul makes a virtue out of it by saying that we should not rely on human philosophy but on God's power.

Gospel: this is part of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, and these sayings about salt and light follow on from the Beatitudes. Although Jesus says 'you are', these are really commands: this is what Christian disciples should be like. We should also note that 'you' is plural: it is the community, the Church, which is called to be salt and light. Salt brings out the existing taste of the food; if however the Church becomes corrupt or conforms completely to the secular world and fails to bring Christ's teachings to the world, it is useless. Likewise, the Church itself is not the light, but the lamp which enables Christ who is the light of the world to be seen.

Sunday 16th February 2014: Today's Mass: Sixth Sunday of Ordinary Time
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By Fr David Gibbons, Centre for Catholic Formation, Archdiocese of Southwark

First Reading: we have free will, but God does not want us to sin. We can choose to keep the commandments faithfully.

Psalm: following God's law is the only thing which can bring happiness, but to do that requires God's help.

Second Reading: Paul is here cleverly using the Corinthian's own philosophical vocabulary against them: they are claiming to be 'spiritual' but in fact are not. The true wisdom of the Spirit is quite beyond ordinary human knowledge and language.

The sayings in today's Gospel are only found in Matthew, although Jesus' claim to be fulfilling the law and the prophets rather than abolishing them and His criticism of the scribes and Pharisees are common enough.

The first point is that we cannot reject the Old Testament: it is part of our salvation history, and Christ does not make sense without it. So the Ten Commandments for example are still in force; we cannot replace them with a vague, hippy-style appeal to love.

Secondly, Jesus has some hard things to say about anger, lust, divorce, and oaths. There will few of us who can measure our own lives against these commandments and not be provoked to go to Confession, to acknowledge our shortfalls!

Sunday 23rd February 2014: Today's Mass: Seventh Sunday of Ordinary Time
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By Fr David Gibbons, Centre for Catholic Formation, Archdiocese of Southwark

The First Reading is part of what is known as the Holiness Code in Leviticus. At God's command, Moses gives some practical implications of what it means to be holy.

The Psalm is a song of praise to God, who is perfectly holy, forgiving, compassionate and loving.

Second Reading: St Paul underlines the countercultural character of Christianity: Godly wisdom seems foolish to the world, and vice versa.

Gospel: Jesus continues on from last Sunday's Gospel, this week with hard sayings about non-violent resistance and love of enemies. If this all seems a bit impossible, Jesus' last command seems totally impossible: "you therefore must be perfect". If we remember that we are made in God's image, then although we know we will fail we can at least strive to be perfect like God.

Sunday 2nd March 2014: Today's Mass: Eighth Sunday of Ordinary Time
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By Fr David Gibbons, Centre for Catholic Formation, Archdiocese of Southwark

First Reading: even if God's people ('Zion') feel abandoned by God, in fact God will never forget us.

The Psalm is a song of confidence and trust in God. Perhaps when our faith is weak or we are beset by trials, this would be a good psalm to recite.

Second Reading: in a reversal of our trust in God highlighted in the other Readings, St Paul says that God shows trust in us. He has made us stewards of his mysteries; will we be found worthy or wanting of this trust?

After some very difficult and demanding words in previous weeks, and a warning about money, Our Lord in today's Gospel tells us not to worry but to trust in God. These words are among the most powerful and popular in all of scripture. It is demanding being a disciple of Christ, but God generously gives good gifts to his children, so we should not fret ourselves.

Lent begins on Wednesday, which is Ash Wednesday. The Readings focus on almsgiving, fasting, and prayer. In the Psalm we recognise that we are sinners, in need of God's mercy.

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