**TWENTY-NINTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME**

**16th October 2022**

**Reading I: Exodus 17:8-13**

The narrative relates the first battle of Israel after their deliverance from Egypt. Victory, however, is based not on their might or prowess but on the power of God accessed through the intercessory power of Moses. It comes from an age of tribalism and superstition and we must make allowances in understanding. This reading seems to have been chosen for to-day because the perseverance of Moses in prayer is taken up in Jesus’ story of the widow’s perseverance with the judge. As long as Moses prayed the Israelites prevailed, and when he faltered the Amalekites prevailed. (The Amalekites were also a nomadic people descended from Esau) The ancient Jewish posture for prayer was standing with arms raised and palms open, a posture that is increasingly coming back into practice.

**Responsorial Psalm: 121:1-8**

This beautiful psalm of trust in divine protection needs little comment. If we have accepted the intercessory interpretation of the first reading, this psalm forms an excellent response to God's protection of his Church militant on earth. in any case, it suggests a reflection on the biblical truth behind the dogma of the "infallibility" of the Church, namely, that God will never finally forsake his Church, however severe his judgment upon it may be from time to time. His care and protection of the Church is exactly like that shown to the first Israel—never abandoning it, restoring it even after exile.

**Reading II: 2 Timothy 3:14-4:2**

Like the Exodus reading, this one takes no less effort to decipher Paul’s meaning, through the words he used. Two words in this passage have caused problems which Paul could never have anticipated. He refers to ‘scripture’ and ‘inspiration’ which Paul would not have thought ambiguous.

‘Scripture’ is ‘grammata’ and in the first century simply meant writing whether it be a shopping list or a Best Man’s speech. When it was used of the Hebrew Tanakh (the Jewish Bible comprising the books of law, the prophets, and collected writings) it was commonly referred to as ‘holy writing’ as Paul does in the third line of the Sunday Missal reading. But, by the fifth line, he has dropped the ‘holy’ which is taken for granted. This was an early step towards the later practice of reserving the English word ‘scripture’ to mean ‘The Bible’ to the exclusion of all other meanings.

Holiness implied ‘special’ ‘important’ and ‘different’ and had increasingly been associated with the Tanakh over a number of years before Paul’s correspondence. Tanakh was holy because it contained what God had said to his people through his prophets and was therefore without error of any sort. The word ‘inspired’ in the 5th line in the Missal reading is ‘God-breathed’

The writings chosen to be included in the Tanakh were selected on their antiquity and presumed authorship. This respect for the Old Testament was gradually applied to the New Testament writings too but only from the middle of the second century onwards by which time they also had acquired age and the authors had become heroic legends.

Selection also depended on what was in the local Church library. So, Paul is here referring to the Old Testament but not to the Christian writings, which were still incomplete at the time of writing. Those who first read his letters would not have thought of them in the same way that they took for granted in the Old Testament.

Thus, the New gradually acquired the same status that the Old had possessed with its authority and inspiration and by the 16th century provided the Reformers with an authoritative alternative to the Papacy. The ‘scriptures’ became a flawless source of revelation that made every reader infallible rather than just one.

I think that to-day, we have a more credible approach. I see the ‘scriptures’ as historical documents which bear human witness to what the authors claim to be a divine presence that once walked the earth. They are certainly ‘holy’ but by virtue of their subject matter rather than an intrinsic property of their own.

**Gospel: Luke 18:1-8**

I believe that this story of the unjust judge is the one which most clearly provides evidence for the historical existence of Jesus with the unique teaching he delivered. The first sentence gives it away. It says, ***Jesus told his disciples a parable about the need to pray continually and never lose heart***. (Jerusalem Bible translation)

The problem is that this is a misunderstanding. This is how Luke or one of his early readers introduced Jesus’ story, but they missed the point. The lesson to be derived from the parable is that God is ***not*** like the judge. The Father of Jesus gives readily and willingly and Christians do ***not*** have to badger him. The judge is not a role model for God and the persistence of the woman unnecessary for Christians.

In fact, the woman is far from longwinded for she speaks only eight words. She does not prevail because of her persuasive argument but because of her endless repetition. Elsewhere Jesus tells us long prayers and repetitions will not make God hear us any better (Matthew 6:7-8). He already knows our needs and is ready to grant them before we ask.

God has assured us that he hears and always answers prayer though maybe not always granting it. We must have the faith of Christ that God can provide what we need, if not what we want. He enjoys hearing us ask according to His will, and desires to give us abundantly what we should have. The point of the story is that we do not need to persist in prayer.

Another difference between Jesus’ teaching and Luke’s presentation of it is in the central figure. In the opening line, Luke has focussed on the woman as a role model for prayer but in the closing line Jesus draws attention to the nature of God, which is at the heart of the story.

Notwithstanding the above, the most intriguing part of the passage as printed in the Missal lies in the very last sentence. 'But, when the Son of Man comes, will he find any faith on earth?' (Luke 18:8). What connection has this question with the story?

This is a difficult saying because scholars cannot be quite sure as to what it means, especially in relation to its context. The phrase ‘Son of Man’ was distinctly one used by Jesus of himself, so it is highly likely to be something he had once said in some circumstances, since forgotten. He most commonly used the phrase in connection with his return, which in the years after the Ascension was the overriding preoccupation of Christians.

When a question is asked in Greek, it is often possible to determine, from the order of words, or the presence of one particle or another, whether the answer expected is 'Yes' or 'No'. But no such help is given in this case. Many commentators assume that the answer implied here is 'No', but there are no grounds for this assumption. Strictly it is a completely open question.

It is possible indeed that it is Luke who attached the question to the parable, but also possible that an early reader inserted it because in his mind, he saw some connection. If so, then it may have come from the conclusion of a story or some other context which is no longer recoverable.