

Readings and Reflections for the Week

Sunday 16 August - ASSUMPTION OF THE BLESSED VIRGIN MARY

Reading 1, Revelation 11:19;12:1-6,10
Psalm 44(45), Reading 2, 1 Corinthians 15:20-27
Gospel, Luke 1:39-56
The Almighty has done great things for me

Monday 17 August - Feria

Reading 1, Ezekiel 24:15-24
Deuteronomy 32:18-21, Gospel, Matthew 19:16-22
If you wish to be perfect, go and sell what you own

Tuesday 18 August - Feria

Reading 1, Ezekiel 28:1-10
Deuteronomy 32:26-28,30,35-36
Gospel, Matthew 19:23-30
It is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven

Wednesday 19 August - St John Eudes

Reading 1, Ezekiel 34:1-11, Psalm 22(23)
Gospel, Matthew 20:1-16

Why be envious because I am generous?

Thursday 20 August - St Bernard

Reading 1, Ezekiel 36:23-28
Psalm 50(51), Gospel, Matthew 22:1-14
Invite everyone you can to the wedding

Friday 21 August - St Pius X, Pope

Reading 1, Ezekiel 37:1-14
Psalm 106(107), Gospel, Matthew 22:34-40
The commandments of love

Saturday 22 August - Queenship of the Blessed Virgin Mary

Reading 1, Ezekiel 43:1-7, Psalm 84(85)
Gospel, Matthew 23:1-12
They do not practise what they preach

Sunday 23 August - TWENTY-FIRST SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

Reading 1, Isaiah 22:19-23, Psalm 137 (138)
Reading 2, Romans 11:33-36
Gospel, Matthew 16:13-20
You are Peter and on this rock I will build my Church

United with Churches together in St Albans this week we pray for all members of St Paul's Church.

SAINT OF THE WEEK ST BERNARD

St Bernard was born in Burgundy in 1090 into a noble family. In 1112, the 22-year-old Bernard, with 30 companions presented himself at the new and struggling reform Cistercian abbey of Citeaux under Abbot St Stephen Harding. Three years later, Bernard was sent with 12 monks to found the new abbey of Clairvaux, of which he was to be abbot until his death in 1153. From Clairvaux, Bernard founded 67 daughter houses; the Cistercian Order grew from one house to 343. For Bernard, the monastic life involved work, contemplation, and prayer; and revolved around two fixed points: Jesus and Mary. For the Cistercian abbot, Christ is all: "When you discuss or speak, nothing has any flavour for me, if I have not heard you resound the Name of Jesus (Sermons on the Song of Songs, XV). And Mary, St Bernard writes, leads us to Jesus: "In dangers, In dangers, in doubts, in difficulties, think of Mary, call upon Mary. Let not her name depart from your lips, never suffer it to leave your heart. And that you may more surely obtain the assistance of her prayer, neglect not to walk in her footsteps. With her for guide, you shall never go astray". In his work On Loving God, Bernard points out the path of humility in order to achieve love of God. He exhorts us to love God without measure. For the Cistercian monk, there are four fundamental degrees or grades of love: *Love of oneself for oneself*: "First, one loves oneself for one's own sake. Seeing, then, that by himself he cannot subsist, he begins to seek God by means of faith." *Love of God for love of self*: "In the second grade, then, one loves God, but for oneself, not for Him. Beginning then to attend to God and to honour Him, in relation to one's own needs." *Love of God for God*: "The soul passes to the third grade, loving God not for oneself, but for Him. In this degree we stop for a long time; indeed, I do not know if in this life it is possible to reach the fourth grade." *Love of self for God*: "That degree, that is, in which one loves himself only for love of God. Then, there will be a wonderful almost forgetfulness of self, almost abandoning of oneself so that everything tends toward God, so much so as to be one spirit only with Him."

Among the writings of St Bernard is also the elegy of the monastic military order of the Templars, founded in 1119 by a group of knights under the guidance of his relative, Hugues de Payens, from Champagne. His doctrine of the four degrees of love and his ardent Christocentric and Marian piety made him the principal source of the effective Catholic spirituality of the Middle Ages. He died at Clairvaux on 20 August 1153. Pope Alexander III canonised him in 1174, the first Cistercian saint by formal canonisation. Pope Pius VIII declared him a Doctor of the Universal Church on 20 August 1830, with the title Doctor Mellifluus, the Honey-Sweet (or Mellifluous) Doctor, in reference to his eloquence.

Pope Pius XII's encyclical *Doctor Mellifluus* in 1953, on the eighth centenary of Bernard's death, calls him the last of the Fathers of the Church. Pope Benedict XVI, in 21 October 2009, said that for Bernard the heart of theology is the contemplation of the love of God revealed in the Crucified Christ, and that his Sermons on the Song of Songs are perhaps the highest summit of Latin medieval mysticism.

REFLECTIONS

First Reading, Revelation 11:19; 12:1-6.10

This vision of the Woman giving birth and of the huge red Dragon is bewilderingly rich in biblical symbolism. The context of the Book of Revelation is the struggle between the Church and the demands of Roman paganism, particularly the demand that all should worship the Emperor as God. The purpose of Revelation is to reassure the faithful of victory, despite the threat of martyrdom. The Woman represents Israel, the people of God, who gives birth to a son, the true ruler of the universe. The Dragon, of great sagacity and immense power, is the Roman Empire. The Son is unhesitatingly whipped up to heaven, frustrating the evil Dragon of its prey and issuing immediately in the hymn of triumph. The perspective is, of course, foreshortened, omitting the details of Christ's earthly life, to show the certainty of the Son's triumph. Secondly, tradition sees in the Woman the earthly mother of the Saviour, Mary, mother of Jesus and mother of the Church, who triumphs over all the powers of evil. The secondary symbolism, therefore, is that Mary is the great sign in heaven of triumph over evil. Evil has no hold on Mary, and her children are sure of victory.

What does this reading have to say to us about Mary?

Second Reading, 1 Corinthians 15:20-26

On the Festival of the Assumption of Mary it is important to get things in the right order. Christ is the first-born from the dead. In him all will be brought to life, but all in their proper order. Mary is the first after her Son, and raised by her Son because she is part of his Body, the Church. The perfection of the Mother of the Saviour is won for her by her Son. He draws her after him in his retinue. In this chapter Paul is teaching about bodily resurrection. This is not merely immortality of the soul, but the resurrection of the whole person, an animated body, not a soul hidden in a body. Bodily resurrection is particularly fitting when we consider Mary, the physical mother of Jesus, who gave to him her genes, her personality, her features and her talents. If any son takes after his mother physically, it must have been Jesus. The declaration by the Church of the Assumption of Mary is an assertion of the saving value of all our activity, the healing touch, the conquest of pain, exhaustion, moodiness and physical temptation in all its forms. That is why Mary goes ahead of us all and leads the way to full resurrection. Jesus got both his genes and his training from Mary.

So what would it have been like to meet her? How would you explain to someone the Church's teaching on the Resurrection and how this connects with our teaching on the Assumption?

Gospel Reading, Luke 1:39-56

The core of this Gospel reading is Mary's canticle of thanksgiving for God's gifts to her. It is, however, fitting that, on the Feast of the bodily Assumption of Mary, it should begin with her bodily attention to the bodily needs of her elderly relative. With her own baby on the way, she would have plenty of other priorities, making her long journey a real act of kindness. Her canticle, sung daily in the liturgy of Evening Prayer, sums up God's faithfulness to his promises, focussed on his gifts to this simple peasant girl. It combines a wonderful sense of the holiness of God with warmth of gratitude, showing the thoughts that revolved constantly in Mary's mind. As is fitting in the mouth of a girl whose only knowledge of books was the Bible, Mary's song is a texture of scriptural phrases. We cannot assume that Luke wrote it down at Mary's dictation, for putting words in the mouth of his characters is a feature of Luke the historian; but it must reflect her thinking. If any theme resounds again and again throughout the Bible, it is God's care for the poor, for the simple and for those in need. It is this which sets the Hebraeo-Christian tradition apart from the ways of the world. What was Mary thinking as she walked to Elizabeth's home and back again?

How may we in our daily lives show gratitude and give praise to God?