

Readings and Reflections for the Week

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

Monday 24 August - St Bartholomew, Apostle

Reading 1, Revelation 21:9-14

Psalm 144(145), Gospel, John 1:45-51

You will see heaven laid open, and the Son of Man

Tuesday 25 August - FERIA

Reading 1, 2 Thessalonians 2:1-3, 14-17

Psalm 95(96), Gospel, Matthew 23:23-26

Clean the inside of the cup first, so that the outside may become clean

Wednesday 26 August - FERIA

Reading 1, 2 Thessalonians 3:6-10, 16-18

Psalm 127(128), Gospel, Matthew 23:27-32

You are the sons of those who murdered the prophets

Thursday 27 August - St Monica

Reading 1, 1 Corinthians 1:1-9

Psalm 144(145), Gospel, Matthew 24:42-51

He is coming at an hour you do not expect

Friday 28 August - St Augustine

Reading 1, 1 Corinthians 1:17-25

Psalm 32(33), Gospel, Matthew 25:1-13

The wise and foolish virgins

Saturday 29 August - Beheading of St John the Baptist

Reading 1, 1 Corinthians 1:26-31, Psalm 32(33)

Gospel, Mark 6:17-29

The beheading of St John the Baptist

Sunday 30 August - TWENTY-SECOND SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

Reading 1, Jeremiah 20:7-9, Psalm 62(63)

Reading 2, Romans 12:1-2

Gospel, Matthew 16:21-27

"Get behind me, Satan"

United with Churches together in St Albans this week we pray for all members of Churches Together in Hertfordshire.

SAINTS OF THE WEEK

St Monica was the mother of one of the greatest saints of the Church: St Augustine. She was born in Thagaste, North Africa and raised a Christian. She married Patricius, a pagan man who had a violent temper and an immoral lifestyle; they had three children. Monica's marriage and home life were difficult, but she was a woman of deep faith and prayer. Earlier in her life she had struggled with alcohol but overcame these difficulties. Once married, her husband initially opposed her Christian faith and prayer life. She wanted to baptize her children but Patricius refused permission. Monica prayed fervently for her family's conversion. Affected by Monica's virtues and her deep love for him, Patricius was converted and baptized. He died one year later when Augustine was about 16. Aged 17, Augustine was sent to Carthage to study rhetoric. There he met a woman with whom he lived and had a child, despite his mother's warnings against fornication. In Carthage, Augustine was introduced to the teachings of Mani, a man who claimed to be a prophet and taught that there was a fundamental conflict between light and darkness. Light was good; darkness was evil. When Augustine returned from Carthage, he began to teach in his hometown. When he announced he had become a Manichaean, Monica threw him out of her house. God then spoke to her in a vision that gave her hope for her son, and she reconciled with him. Augustine aged about 31 decided to open a school of Rhetoric in Rome. With her other children already baptized, Monica told Augustine she would accompany him. However, Augustine sneaked off and travelled to Rome without her. Monica followed him only to find that he taken up a teaching position in Milan. She followed him there. Over the next four years, Monica never gave up, praying for her son through tears. Augustine was drawn to preaching of the Catholic Bishop of Milan - the future St Ambrose. Around the year 387, at the age of 33, Augustine converted to Christianity and was baptized - an answer to his mother's prayers. Once converted, Augustine and his mother decided to return home, but Monica fell ill and died just outside of Rome. Augustine went on to become one of the most influential theologians in the history of the Church. In his book, *Confessions*, Saint Augustine shares the story of his mother. She had a profound impact upon him, and he, in turn, has had a profound impact upon the entire Church. St Monica endured a difficult life, but she persevered, overcame her difficulties, and devoted herself to a life of prayer and virtuous living. Although St Augustine is the most well-known saint, St Monica made a huge difference to the lives of her entire family. She is seen by many as a model of hope for those whose family members have gone astray. As we honour her let us ponder the power of her prayers.

Prayer

St Monica, though you had a difficult life, you continually turned your difficulties over to God. You prayed, grew in virtue, and had a profound impact on your whole family. Please pray for me, that I will never lose hope for those who have gone astray but will remain faithful in prayer for them, trusting in God's divine mercy. St Monica, pray for me. Jesus, I trust in You.

REFLECTIONS

First Reading, Isaiah 22:19-23

This reading from Isaiah is chosen to pair with the gospel reading about the appointment of Peter, for there Peter is appointed as head of Jesus' own team. In this first reading Isaiah predicts that Eliakim will take the place of Shebna as master of the king's palace in Jerusalem and that God will invest him with authority. In Isaiah's time, to open and close the doors of the palace was the privilege of the master of the place. To the Hebrew mind such a pair of opposites often signifies everything in-between them, so that opening and closing the doors means having control of everything that goes on; no one else may interfere. Similarly by the pair of opposites 'binding' and 'loosing', Peter is given total authority over the assembly or community of Jesus that is the Church. Equivalently, as Eliakim is given the key of the palace on his shoulder (or, as we would say, round his neck), so Peter is given the keys of the kingdom of heaven. Peter is sometimes pictured as the doorkeeper of heaven, but 'the kingdom of heaven' is far wider: it means 'God's sovereignty', which Jesus came to establish on earth, in which all obey, worship and give glory to God.

How does Eliakim's role as master of the palace help us to understand the role of St Peter in the Church?

Second Reading, Romans 11:33-36

After his long and thorough exposition of the way in which the work of Christ won our salvation and how, by his loving obedience, Jesus wiped away the proud sin of Adam's disobedience, Paul has been agonizing in his letter to the Romans about how the Jews can have failed to recognize this fulfilment of God's promises to Abraham. Quoting one passage of scripture after another Paul finally comes to the conclusion that in the end, in God's good time, a remnant of Israel will be saved. How this will be he really cannot explain. Throwing up his hands in incomprehension, he can only burst into this wonderful hymn of praise to God's inscrutable Wisdom. We simply cannot understand God's plans and methods. This concluding passage in Romans is reminiscent of the wonderful passage at the end of the Book of Job. Job has rejected the shallow explanations for his sufferings suggested by his friends, when God intervenes to show Job how mighty and wise he is. Job can only admit that God's Wisdom surpasses anything human beings can conceive, and God's might infinitely transcends any human power. So Paul willingly grants that God must run his own world, and we cannot even attempt to challenge God's reasoning, for everything begins and ends in God.

How do we begin to make sense of God's ways?

Gospel, Matthew 16:13-20

At last Peter recognizes that Jesus is the Messiah, the Christ. At last he realizes that in Jesus he can see the action of God made visible. The disciples followed Jesus as soon as he called, but for a long time they were puzzled about what to make of him, of his wonderful teaching and his godlike personality. Now comes a shaft of light and understanding. We too often take some time to appreciate the true worth of someone we know well: a little gesture can sometimes reveal just how generous and thoughtful they are. Peter suddenly grasps that here is the Son of God, acting among them, a daunting or even terrifying thought. Jesus replies to Peter's recognition with his own generosity, giving him a new name, 'Rock', for this is what 'Peter' means. If you name something, you make it your own, take it to yourself. This is just what Jesus does with Simon who becomes his own Peter, his own 'Rock'. That is the importance of the naming of a child at Baptism: Jesus takes us to himself and we become his. The early Christians called themselves 'Those over whom the name of Jesus has been called'. We may have been named Mary or John, but the name of Jesus has been called over us and we have become his.

What are the implications for us of Jesus' promise to Peter?