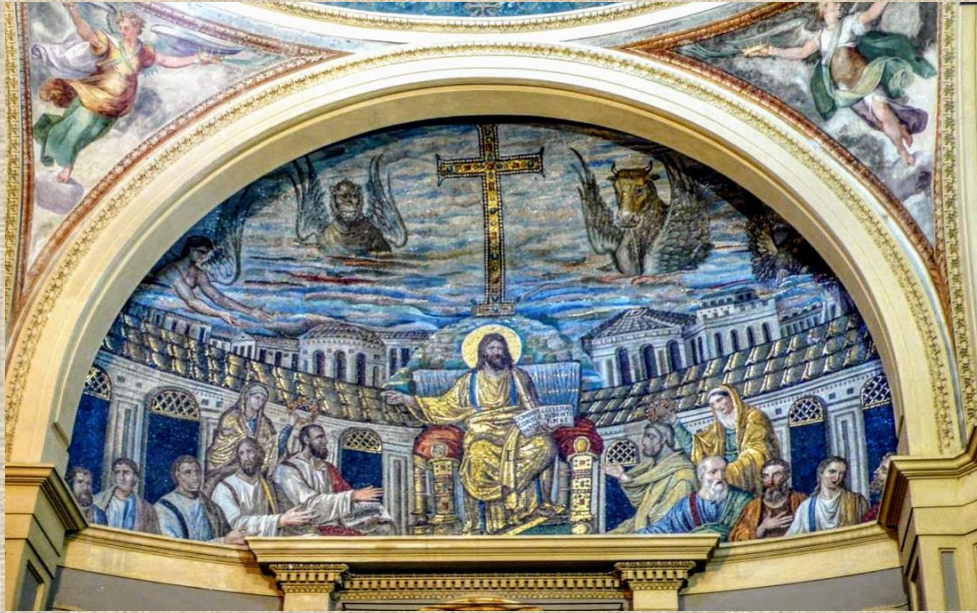


Conversations with Scripture

This is the first issue of an ongoing newsletter dedicated to the interpretation of Scripture and the Sunday readings from the Roman lectionary.



This apse mosaic is in the Church of Santa Pudenziana in Rome. It was built in 140-155 AD over the old baths by Pope Pius I in honour of Pudenziana, daughter of Pudens, a Roman senator. It is thought by many to be the most beautiful Church in Rome. It became a basilica in the 4th century AD and most of the mosaics date from this period.

Christ is depicted in human form, not symbolic. Christ and the entire scene depict imperial power and majesty in Christian form. The humble rabbi from Galilee is far in the past - Christ sits on a jewel-encrusted throne, signifying imperial authority. This in turn signals the power and authority of Christ and the Church.

Christ assumes the stance of a classical Roman teacher, with right arm extended, and he wears a halo. The words, 'Dominus Conservator Ecclesiae Pudenzianae' mean 'The Lord is the preserver of the church of Pudenziana.' The apostles wear senatorial togas. The female figures represent the churches of the Gentiles and the Jews - note that there does not seem to be any disparagement of the church of the circumcision. The symbols of the four evangelists - the angel, lion, ox, and eagle - are the oldest depictions in Rome. The cross does not bear a corpus. The backdrop is the city of Rome.

This reflects a time in which the power of the Church was making an impact on the governance and culture of the city.

Breaking Open the Word of God

- Each week there will be a reflection on the Sunday readings along with some interesting biblical facts

18th Sunday in Ordinary Time

- Exodus 16:2-4, 12-15, 31a; Psalm 78; Ephesians 4:17, 20-24; John 6:24-35

Bible and the Visual Arts

- Each week there will be a visual presentation of a Bible passage along with commentary

What is the Word of God?

Indeed, the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart. *(Heb. 4:12 NRS)*

When we use the term ‘the Word of God,’ it means far more than the letters on a page. ‘Word’ implies the divine will, as well as a divine message and communication, and it can take many forms. A recent Vatican document, *Verbum Domini*, named the events of salvation history, Scripture, sacred writings, art, music, poetry, nature, and acts of loving kindness as ways in which God’s dynamic will is manifested. Jesus is the very Word made flesh and is the divine teacher and redeemer.

Anything that elevates the mind, heart, and soul towards God qualifies as God’s Word. The Bible comes to us in ways other than the written form – the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel is but one example among many. Visual presentations of Scripture touch the emotions and the layers of human consciousness – they are far more than ‘pretty pictures.’ There is a message in each one that is not always immediately obvious, and they require reflection and meditation.

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The Tree of Life



This intricate mosaic is found in the apse of the Church of San Clemente in Rome. The middle of the mosaic is the tree of life, while the bottom – taken from Psalm 42 – depicts two deer drinking from the flowing water representing the Spirit. The water (Spirit) flows up the tree and nourishes the vines, calling to mind the Gospel of John chapter 15, where Jesus declares that he is the true vine.

The doves signify the peace of God, while the peacocks along the bottom point to the resurrection and immortality. At the top, the hand of God reaches downward from heaven, while Christ reigns supreme at the far top. Christ the Lamb of God is at the bottom with the sheep – the apostles and believers. Christ and the Spirit sustain all creation, bringing together heaven and earth, spirit and flesh.

Christ Crucified



The cross and the crucified Christ were seldom used for public devotional purposes in the early Church. This image is from the doors of Santa Sabina in Rome and dates from the 6th century AD. It is the first known image of Christ crucified.

Note that the depiction is symbolic – the figures appear oversized and out of proportion.

18th Sunday in Ordinary Time

August 4, 2024

(Year B) Exodus 16:2-4, 12-15, 31a; Psalm 78; Ephesians 4:17, 20-24; John 6:24-35

The story of the journey of the Israelites through the wilderness is not pretty or inspiring. The people were fickle, fearful, untrusting, and ungrateful. They raged bitterly against Moses and his brother Aaron, and there were even a couple of attempts to overthrow Moses and install a more compliant leader. But the worst of their negative behaviour was their cynical criticism of God. Forgotten were the miraculous escape from Egypt, the humbling of pharaoh and the gods of Egypt, and the passage through the sea. Now all they could do was accuse God of luring them into the wilderness in order to kill them. And they conjured up fantasies of how good things had been in Egypt. In other words, they were human and did what many humans do. When things get tough, sometimes gratitude and courage suffer. God's reply to this latest infidelity was to grant them a superabundance of food. Quail and manna from heaven soon arrived – more than enough to satisfy their hunger. This was a sort of test – God would remove the source of their discontent in order to determine if they would be obedient. But it was not really about the food. Complaints are usually about other things. The people did not take well to hardship, sacrifice, and discipline. God's test failed; the people were not up to the challenge and many instances of rebellion, negativity, and faithlessness followed. As a consequence, God made them wander in the wilderness for forty years, until the generation born in slavery had perished. We should not judge the Israelites, for they are mirror images of all peoples. The story of liberation in Exodus and the journey through the wilderness in Exodus and Numbers is a metaphor for the journey of the soul through life. Perhaps we recognize some of our own attitudes and behaviour when we engage the biblical text. The lesson present in the story is the necessity for constancy and faith in our journey. God accompanies us on the journey and stands ready to provide for us, but our minds and hearts must be in harmony with the divine source.

All of this means breaking from old habits and ways of thinking, as the author of Ephesians notes. Being a follower of the Lord means making a sharp break with the past and learning new ways of thinking and acting. The image and likeness of God that is within us is restored and renewed when we put on the new person. Some are disappointed with their faith in the Lord because they feel that nothing has changed in their lives. But the change comes from within us, with the aid of the Spirit. Although the initiative is from the Lord, the cooperation and engagement with the process can only come from us.

The crowd had been dazzled when Jesus performed the multiplication of the loaves and fishes. But they had not understood what he was about, for they tried to seize him and make him king. Then they raced to the other side of the lake looking for Jesus, for they had not seen him leave with the others. Jesus knew what was in their minds and hearts – they chased after him because of the food that he produced and for the power he represented. But he then urged them to seek another type of food that was eternal and would never perish. This is what he represented: he was the bread – the nourishment and sustenance – that comes down from heaven. They did not understand and continued to speak of the bread in literal everyday terms. Jesus was offering them the opportunity to be connected to the divine source, but not many would sign on. They asked him the perennial question: what do we have to do to perform the works of God? His answer was deceptively simple: believe in the one whom God has sent. Is that all? But in John's gospel, believing in Jesus means dwelling and abiding in him continually and relying upon him for spiritual energy and sustenance rather than on earthly things. We must choose what will reside in the deepest regions of our heart and soul: our ego or the Christ.