

SUNDAY FEBRUARY 16, 2020.

FIRST READING

Deuteronomy 30:15-20

This passage opens like the crash of a gauntlet thrown on a table. *"See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity."* The place is the east bank of the Jordan. The long wilderness journey is over. Jericho shimmers in the distant heat. The people have realized that nothing comes without a struggle. To keep strong their own sense of destiny they must have an unbreakable trust in God.

For some years western Christianity has been on a wilderness journey. Another stage is beginning, the issues becoming clearer. Our culture as a whole seems to have every intention of severing itself from Christian faith and its institutions. Future Christian generations will be formed in ways we can only dimly imagine.

THE PSALM 119: 1-8

True freedom, says the psalmist, is grounded in criteria not shaped by oneself but accepted as emanating from God. Freedom is being free within boundaries and limits, a concept that clashes with contemporary thinking. But suppose boundaries are themselves accepted and welcomed into one's life? *When I regard your commandments, writes the poet, I thank you with an unfeigned heart.*

THE SECOND READING

I Corinthians 3:1-9

Probably the toughest passage ever written by Paul to an emerging church. It is important that we understand that when Paul differentiates between *"spiritual people and people of the flesh"* he means, on the one hand, those who are committed to seeking a higher will than their own for their living, and, on the other, those consumed by their own personal agendas.

THE HOLY GOSPEL

Matthew 5: 21-37

Jesus, whether he is speaking about emotions or relationships, points to the wisdom of dealing with such things at their early stage. To ignore the early stages of anger is to risk serious consequences. To ignore the early stages of sexual infatuation with someone already married is to run the risk of exploitation, the possible ruin of a relationship, and even abuse. It is interesting that Jesus refers to the two most powerful forces in human experience, conflict and sexuality. Then, using proverbial images of his time – plucking an eye, severing a hand - he emphasises the absolute necessity of early response to such challenges.