

THE FOURTH SUNDAY IN LENT – B

On this fourth Sunday we have part of Jesus' conversation with the Pharisee Nicodemus. Jesus tells Nicodemus that his death, 'the Son of man must be lifted up,' will be the way to eternal life but everyone must believe in this Son of man, refusal to believe brings one's own condemnation. Jesus is the light of life and without this light we live in darkness. The first reading tells how the Chosen People who did not keep the Sinai Covenant, last week's reading, are punished by God who is nonetheless prepared to forgive them and bring them back to their homeland. In the second reading we again have Paul preaching Christ crucified and how God 'raised us up with him and gave us a place with him in heaven.'

The **First Reading** is from the first/second book of Chronicles. These books are complementary to the earlier historical books and belong to post-exilic Judaism when the community living in and around Jerusalem enjoyed a degree of autonomy subject to their overlords. The author is a Levite of the priestly tribe and for him the priesthood, the Law and the Temple and its ritual were the centre of national life along with which were personal devotion, wisdom doctrines and memories of the past which included the good times along with the failures and belief in the promises made through the prophets. The first book although it starts with Adam deals mainly with the reign of King David in an idealized way and the prophecy of Nathan promising the endurance of the Davidic line. The second book speaks of the reign of Solomon and the construction of the Temple followed by an account of the kings of Judah who, apart from Hezekiah and Josiah, were unfaithful to the Covenant which brought disaster. The Israelites are carried off into slavery but God sends a redeemer in the person of the Persian king, Cyrus.

The reading, 36.14-16,19-23, is the last three paragraphs to the second book of Chronicles. Last week Israel promised as a covenanted people to keep the covenant God made with them at Sinai, they were unfaithful and although warned time and again by God's prophets their infidelity grew and at last God acted, (end of first paragraph). God allows their enemies to destroy the Temple and carry off the inhabitants into slavery in Babylon (the second paragraph). In the final paragraph of the reading Cyrus king of Persia fulfils God's word spoken by the prophet Jeremiah. Cyrus heralds the joyful return of the Israelites to Jerusalem, 'Let him go up' and the triumphal rebuilding of the Temple and with it, the Chronicler understands, the restoration of the promises made by the prophet Nathan. All is restored!

The **Responsorial Psalm**, Psalm 136.1-6, is a psalm of the exiles in Babylon, they cannot they must not forget Jerusalem and all the joy it brings to the heart.

The **Second Reading** is from Paul's letter to the Ephesians. If you have time read the whole of this wonderful letter, it's only six chapters long. The letter was written while Paul was imprisoned in Rome (61-63 A.D.) and he follows what he taught in Colossians about the subordinate place of the powers of the universe by teaching that the Church as the Body of Christ embraces the whole of the new universe, 'the fullness of him who is filled, all in all.' He then deals with the continuous problem of Jew and gentile. Salvation is a gift given by God through Christ and this salvation is available equally to Jew and gentile, this shows something of the infinite wisdom of the mystery of God's inexhaustible love. In the last analysis God's plans are seen to be fulfilled in Christ, and in the Church the extension of Christ through history. This unity in Christ is incompatible with any lack of charity, for their attitude to each other is the measure of their attitude to Christ in whom all are one.

The reading, 2.4-10, is the conclusion to the opening section which deals with God's plan of salvation 'in Christ.' This is followed by a section on the triumph and supremacy of Christ and Paul concludes with his teaching that salvation in Christ is a free gift. The opening lines of the reading prepare us for the words in the gospel reading 'God loved the world so much.' The sending of God's Son is implicit because we have been brought to life with Christ, and saved by grace, a free gift of God, and once saved we have been raised up with Christ. The reading goes on to show that that though we have been saved by grace this still requires our belief. We are as Paul tells the Ephesians 'God's work of art' and God has a plan for each of us because we have been 'created in Christ Jesus for the good works which God has already designated to make up our way of life' -- some important points for us to meditate during the period of Lent.