

## THE FIFTEENTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR – A

In the gospel reading we learn how Christ comes to sow the seed of his Word and how that seed falls in different places symbolising the reception the Word of God receives when it is sown in to our hearts. In the second reading God's word does not go from Isaiah's mouth and return empty but it succeeds in what it was sent to do, a fitting preparation for the gospel reading. In the second reading Paul teaches us that the whole of creation is groaning in one great act of giving birth waiting for our bodies to be set free from the attraction of sin.

The **First Reading** comes from the prophet Isaiah. He was a major prophet in Israel but the book which bears his name is not all his work. The reading today comes from the second part of the book, chs.40-55 (Second Isaiah), which deals with a period of Jewish history 200 years after Isaiah's day when Jerusalem has fallen and the nation is in exile in Babylon. Cyrus, the instrument of God, is about to come and overpower the Babylonian Empire and be the means by which the Israelites are able to return, a new Exodus. Embedded in the book are four passages called the 'Songs of the Servant of Yahweh.' They depict a perfect servant of God who is the light of the nations and gathers in God's people. He is one who preaches the true faith who expiates people's sins by his own death and is glorified by God. This part of the book, in contrast with the first part which is for the most part threatening, is far more consoling as the opening words announce: "Console my people, console them," says your God."

The reading, 55.10-11, comes at the end of Second Isaiah. Israel is restored to God's favour and God promises in chapter 54 that even if the mountains fall and the hills turn to dust yet God's faithful love will never leave them. An even more splendid Jerusalem will be rebuilt and anyone who tries to attack again will not succeed. God declares this through the mouth of his prophet. Chapter 55 is a final invitation to participate in the benefits of the new covenant. To seek the Lord while he is still to be found for although 'my thoughts are not your thoughts and my ways are not your ways' yet God is rich in forgiveness. Now comes our reading; just as the soil of the earth is watered by God to give us food to eat, so the Word that goes out from the mouth of God is like the messenger who does not return until God's mission is discharged. God's Word is alive and active personified for us in the person of Jesus. We must listen to the Word with ears that hear and act on what we hear. This part of the prophecy ends with a joyful message of eternal hope. Read chapters 54-55 if you have time.

The **Responsorial Psalm**, Psalm 64.10-14, is a fitting response to this reading. The earth is blessed with all it needs to provide an abundance of goodness, 'the meadows covered with flocks, the valleys with wheat.' What God does for the physical earth he does even more abundantly for us for his Word is truly the seed of life.

The **Second Reading** is from Paul's letter to the Christians in Rome. Paul had not founded the Church in Rome but he intended to visit the Christians there on his way to Spain. This huge letter, with much detailed teaching, is difficult to summarize. The community in Rome was a mixture of Jewish and non-Jewish converts and there was a danger that they would look down on each other. Some of the converts from Judaism wanted pagan converts to be circumcised to ensure their salvation. Paul maintained this made nonsense of Christ's redemptive work. The Law was good and holy but made those who kept the Law aware of their need of God's help. This help has now been given in Christ Jesus which is explained in some detail.

The reading, 8.18-23, continues from last Sunday's second reading. Paul is teaching about the Christian's spiritual life, or our life in the Spirit. In chapter 7 Paul has been teaching the converts from Judaism in Rome that they are free from keeping slavishly the old Law and he goes on to speak of the inward struggle we have to face under the allurements of sin. Whereas in chapter 8 Paul teaches that the justified Christian who has received the gift of the Spirit has been set free. The law of the Spirit gives life in Christ Jesus and sets one free. Those who live by their natural inclinations have their minds set on human desires but those who live by the Spirit have their minds set on spiritual things, so they must live by the Spirit because the Spirit has made a home in them. It is this Spirit that raised Jesus from the dead and because he lives now in them the Spirit will give life to their mortal bodies. So they must not be ruled by bodily desires because if they are so ruled they will die but if they live by the Spirit they will have life. This does not mean life's difficulties and sufferings are over, and here our reading begins, but they are not to be compared to the glory that awaits us and too 'the whole creation is eagerly waiting for God to reveal his sons' and 'creation still retains the hope of being freed, like us.' 'From the beginning (the fall) till now the entire creation...has been groaning in one great act of giving birth and not only creation but all of us who possess the first fruits of the Spirit we too groan inwardly as we wait for our bodies to be set free.' Paul teaches we must wait in hope with persevering confidence for the glory that awaits us. Read from chapter 7.14 to 8.25 if you have time.