

THE SEVENTEENTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR – A

In the gospel reading we continue to listen to Jesus teaching in parables. The kingdom of heaven is like: a treasure hidden in a field, a merchant looking for fine pearls, a dragnet cast into the sea. In the first reading a young king Solomon pleases God by asking for 'a heart to discern between good and evil.' In the second reading Paul teaches us that God intended us to become true images of his Son.

The **First Reading** is from the first book of Kings, one of the historical books of the Bible. Books 1 and 2 Kings are a continuation from books 1 and 2 Samuel, indeed the first two chapters of 1 Kings which deal with the death of king David, are the concluding chapters of 2 Samuel 9-20. The two books of Kings deal with the reign of Solomon, 1 Kings 3-11, his wisdom, his riches, his building programme including the Temple. It was an age of peace but also of exploitation which aggravated the existing hostility between Judah, in the south, and the northern tribes, Israel. On Solomon's death his kingdom split in two and to the political secession of the northern tribes was added religious schism. This was a period of fraternal strife and attacks from outside; Egypt attacked Judah and the Aramaeans (Syria) attacked the northern tribes. This was only a prelude to the fall of Samaria, capital of the North, to the Assyrians in 721 and the fall of Jerusalem to the Babylonian king in 587, followed by Exile. Woven in among these accounts are the Elijah and Elisha cycles, the two great prophets of the period who had much to say about the religious conduct of the kings of the North. After the political division the kings of Israel are all judged guilty of abandoning Temple sacrifice and erecting a shrine of their own at Bethel, and only two kings of Judah receive fulsome praise. All this ran contrary to the teaching of Deuteronomy that the Temple alone was the place for sacrifice and that the nation will be blessed only if it respects God's covenant and it will be punished if it does not.

The reading, 3.5,7-12, is from the very beginning of Solomon's reign when he marries the daughter of Pharaoh, king of Egypt. As yet there was no Temple and Solomon goes to the principal high place, Gibeon, to offer sacrifice to God. While there he has a dream in which God asks Solomon, 'What would you like me to give you?' God is pleased with Solomon's reply because he does not ask for long life, or riches, or the lives of his enemies but for wisdom to be able to rule God's chosen people with justice. Before the prophetic period dreams were one of God's main channels of communication with humanity.

The **Responsorial Psalm**, Psalm 118. 57,72,76-77,127-130, is the longest of the 150 psalms and is in praise of the Law. It is one of the most remarkable monuments of Israelite devotion to divine revelation each verse has a reference to the Law: word, law, commands, precepts, will. The psalm can be seen as a prayer of King Solomon who loved God and wished to keep his Law. We too must show our love for God by keeping his commandments remembering Jesus' words, 'If you love me you will keep my commandments.'

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, 8.28-30, continues Paul's teaching on the Christian's spiritual life. He has spoken of our life in the Spirit and how we should live spiritual lives. The Spirit who lives in us enables us to call God 'our Father' and although we may have to suffer we must not lose hope in the glory that awaits us because the Spirit helps us to pray in accordance with the mind of God. Today's reading continues with the theme of confidence. God works with those who love him. Christ was sent by the Father and by his death and resurrection has become a new creation in order to restore to fallen humanity the splendour of that image which has been darkened by sin. God does this by moulding us 'to the pattern of his Son.' The glory which Christ possesses is progressively communicated to his children 'and with those he justified he shared his glory.'

Some readers may feel there is a hint of predestination in this reading. It is important to realise that in this passage Paul is not speaking of the predestination of individuals; he is describing God's design apropos of Christians as a group.