

THE TWENTY-FIRST SUNDAY OF THE YEAR – C

This Sunday's gospel reading presents some difficult teaching from Jesus. To pass through 'the narrow door' requires greater care and determination. Then Jesus has some stern words for the people of his own nation just because they are descendants of Abraham it will not give them an automatic right to a place in God's kingdom, 'men from east and west, north and south will come to take their places at the feast in the kingdom of God.' In the first reading Isaiah presents similar concepts it is the converts from the pagan nations who will be gathered and sent out to proclaim God's glory. The second reading gives an explanation for corrective punishment sent to us by the Lord.

The **First Reading** comes from the third part of Isaiah. The work, Isaiah 56-66, is a composite collection, its various parts dating from before the end of the Exile, 538 B.C., to the rebuilding of the Temple in 520 B.C. Taken as a whole this last part of the book of Isaiah seems to be the work of Second Isaiah's disciples composed sometime after the return from exile. It can be considered the final product of the Isaian tradition, active from the days of the great eighth century prophet himself.

The reading, 66.18-21, comes at the end of the book and is part of an eschatological discourse that is a discourse about the end of time. The converted nations are to be gathered by God to witness his glory and some of their number will be sent out to preach the faith in the distant parts of the then known world. Tarshish (Spain), Put (Libya), Lud (Lydia), Meshech (Phrygia), Tubal (Cilicia) and Javan (the Ionians or the Greeks). From all these lands these missionaries 'will bring back all your brothers...to my holy mountain in Jerusalem,' they will be brought back purified for they are still the chosen people. Some of these pagan peoples who were sent out to preach will be admitted to the sacred ministry of the priests and Levites, a remarkably open-minded attitude.

The **Responsorial Psalm**, Psalm 116, is a summons to all nations to praise the Lord for his faithful love for us. The response from Mark's gospel is in tune with the thoughts expressed in the first reading.

The **Second Reading** is from the letter to the Hebrews. This wonderful letter to the Jewish Christians was for a time attributed to Paul's pen but now this is considered not to be the case although he is considered to have had some indirect influence on the letter's contents. It would seem from internal evidence that the letter was written about 67AD, it is addressed to Jewish people who have a good knowledge of the covenant God made with their people, and who became Christians. They left Jerusalem and with an uncertain faith, they yearn for the splendour of the ceremonies carried out in the Temple and are tempted to revert to Judaism, but the writer is intent on preventing this by helping them to see their new life in Christ. They are on a new exodus to the Promised Land (heaven), with Christ, not Moses, as their leader whose one sacrifice on the Cross replaces the many sacrifices of the old priesthood. The letter is a good teaching letter for us showing the harmony between the Old and New Testaments.

The reading, 12.5-7,11-13, continues from the final section of the letter which deals with persevering in faith even when receiving God's fatherly correction. 'When the Lord corrects you do not treat it lightly; do not get discouraged when he reprimands you. For the Lord trains the ones that he loves and he punished all those that he acknowledges as his sons.' The writer continues to encourage by saying God trains us and punishment though painful at the time will bear generous fruit. So we must steady ourselves, walk a straight path and we will receive strength for our journey.