

THE TWENTY-FIRST SUNDAY OF THE YEAR – A

In the gospel reading we hear Simon son of Jonah profess his faith in Jesus in front of all the disciples, 'You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.' Jesus tells him he is 'a blessed man' because this knowledge was revealed to him by 'my Father in heaven.' And so Jesus gives Simon a new name Peter or rock to symbolise the part Peter was to play in the foundation of his community. In the first reading the story of God's servant Eliakim prepares us for the gospel reading. In the second reading Paul brings to a conclusion his teaching about Israel's part in the development of salvation history with a hymn to God's mercy and wisdom.

The **First Reading** comes from the prophet Isaiah, the first part of the book, chs.1-39. Isaiah was born about 765 BC and received his prophetic vocation while in the Temple in Jerusalem. His mission was to proclaim the fall of Israel and Judah as punishment for the nation's infidelity. He exercised his ministry for forty years and proclaimed his teaching in four distinct periods. It seems Isaiah finished his teaching by 700, after which date we know nothing of the prophet. There is a tradition that his life ended in martyrdom. His writings show Isaiah to be a poet of genius. The revelation of the transcendence of God and of human unworthiness he received in the Temple at the time of his call left a lasting mark on the prophet. For Isaiah God is an awesome God, a God who is Holy, Strong, the Mighty One, the King, we are his creatures defiled by sin for which God demands reparation insisting on just living among his people and sincerity in divine worship. Isaiah is the prophet of faith, he insists the people should trust in God in times of national crisis, by this alone will salvation be attained. Isaiah's hope is that a remnant of the people will recognise the Messiah for its King. This Messiah is to be a descendant of David. A prophet of considerable standing, Isaiah gathered round him a school of disciples who preserved his teaching.

The reading, 22.19-23, is from the section dealing with the sayings against the nations but our reading is the only prophecy against an individual, one Shebna, a pretentious petty official, possibly a foreigner, who has climbed to the highest position in the state, master of King Hezekiah's palace. He is deprived of his office and replaced by Eliakim who 'will be a father to the inhabitants of Jerusalem and the house of Judah.' If we read from the beginning of this section, verse 15, it would seem Shebna had spent his time in office improving his own position which displeased God who displaced him. Eliakim will be given 'the key to David's palace' having authority to open and close. In today's gospel reading Peter is given 'the keys of the Kingdom of Heaven' with authority to bind and loose.

The **Responsorial Psalm**, Psalm 137.1-3,6-8, is a hymn of thanksgiving. We thank God for he has listened to our prayer and we will sing to God and bow down before him. God's faithful love and his promises are beyond our dreams and hopes. You hear us when we call and give us strength again, as always God looks on the humble and rejects the proud hearted. The psalm ends with a prayer of hope, since God's faithful love lasts forever we ask him not to abandon us.

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, 11.33-36, a hymn to God's mercy and wisdom, comes at the end of Paul's teaching, chapters 9-11, on Israel's part in the development of salvation history. In these chapters Paul constantly quotes from scripture showing how God loved the Chosen People and yet they so often grumbled against God and challenged the Good News. The failure of his own people to believe and their rejection of the Christ meant Paul was sent to the gentile nations and brought salvation to the world and so the gentiles were able to hear the Word of God. The Jews are still the Chosen People and although some had their minds hardened against God, once the gentiles have received the grace of God, all Israel will be saved. Paul ends this teaching with a hymn to God's mercy and love which is today's reading. This is one of those purple passages in Paul's writing which is so inspiring. He speaks of the richness and depth of God's wisdom and knowledge. Who, Paul asks, knows God's mind or has been his advisor? Anything we give to God is really only repaying a debt. God is the meaning of all that exists indeed of all creation. 'To him be glory for ever! Amen.'