

THE TWENTY-SIXTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR – A

In the gospel reading we hear Jesus saying to the chief priests and elders of the people, 'In truth, I tell you, tax collectors and prostitutes are making their way into the kingdom of God before you' because although the tax collectors and prostitutes turned from God at first yet on hearing Jesus' word they accepted his teaching and lived accordingly. In the first reading Ezekiel teaches that it is the one who renounces sin who deserves to live. In the second reading Paul seeks a unity of love for the Philippians' community and commends to them the example of Christ Jesus who through humility was raised up by God to divine glory.

The **First Reading** is from the prophet Ezekiel, one of the major prophets of Israel. As the text stands Ezekiel's whole ministry is among the exiles in Babylon from 593 to 571. Ezekiel was called by God to maintain the faith of the Israelites during this traumatic period of Jewish history his entire teaching centres on inner conversion: we must achieve a new heart and a new spirit, see Ezk.36.26. The Temple was his ruling interest and he holds the Law in veneration. Ezekiel is primarily a visionary, his four visions occupy a substantial part of the book. The Messiah is not to be a king but a shepherd who will look for individual rather than collective reparation. The book is divided into four parts: 1. Threats and reproaches addressed to the Israelites before the siege of Jerusalem. 2. Proclamations against the nations. 3. Comfort during and after the siege of Jerusalem. 4. Provisions for a new political and religious constitution after the Exile.

The reading, 18.25-28, is from the first section of the book, the threats and reproaches, and is addressed to the Israelites before the siege of Jerusalem began i.e. before the Exile began in 587. In chapter 18 Ezekiel is teaching about individual responsibility, 'The one who sinned is the one to die,' No one else is held responsible for my sins. (see John 9.2.) The first part of the chapter contrasts a good man with a man prone to evil. If a son does not follow the evil ways of his father he will live while the father will die. Ezekiel then asks why the son doesn't bear the father's guilt and the answer given is that each person is responsible for his own actions. So the evil man must give up his evil practises and he will live, but if the good man falls into evil ways he will die. Now the reading starts. Some think the Lord is unjust to forgive the sinner when he renounces his evil ways and similarly unjust to forget the good man's deeds when he abandons his good ways for evil. The conclusion comes two verses on from the end of the reading, 'So in future, House of Israel. I shall judge each of you by what that person does – declares the Lord Yahweh.' By this new teaching a person is liberated from ancestral guilt and can escape the burden of his past sins, the idea of individual not collective responsibility is emphasised. It is the present situation which determines God's judgement. Read the whole of chapter 18 if you have time.

The **Responsorial Psalm**, Psalm 24.4-9, is another of the alphabetical psalms, a prayer in time of danger. The relevant line for us is, 'Do not remember the sins of my youth.' This is a reflection of the thoughts expressed in the first reading. The first verse is a prayer of petition asking God to direct us that we may walk his paths then we will be in no danger. The second verse is closest to the first reading asking God to remember not the sins of our youth but be ever merciful to us. In the final verse we recall God's goodness and uprightness because he 'shows,' he 'guides,' he 'teaches' his ways to the poor and those who listen need have no fear of God.

The **Second Reading** is from Paul's letter to the Philippians. Philippi, one of the principal cities of Macedonia, had been evangelized by Paul in 50 A.D. on his second missionary journey. Paul is now on his third missionary journey and is imprisoned in Ephesus, the capital of Roman Asia. He hopes to revisit the Church at Philippi and while in prison he writes to them a friendly letter, giving some news to his converts there. He warns them to 'Beware of evil workmen!' who will destroy the unity of love and joy which he so much desires for them based on humility, the humility of Christ and to that end he gives the Philippians a poem on the humility of the Messiah. This poem may or may not be from Paul's pen, but it gives witness to early Christian understanding of the nature of Christ.

The reading, 2.1-11, has Paul appealing to the Philippians affectionately invoking all that is most sacred that they might be one in heart and mind. There must be no 'jealousy or vanity' instead in all humility everyone should give preference to others, not pursuing selfish interests. Then comes a very important line, 'Make your own the mind of Christ Jesus' which prepares us to hear the words of the poem which follows. Jesus like Adam was made in the image of God but did not seek equality with God but humbles himself. He took on the condition of a slave 'and being in every way like a human being' Jesus was even more humble because he accepted death, an ignominious death on a cross. Because of this God raised his servant to the heights and gave him a name which is above every other name, 'so that all beings in the heavens, on earth and in the underworld should bend the knee at the name of Jesus' and everyone must acknowledge Jesus as Lord and so give glory to the Father.

