

THE THIRTIETH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR - C

This Sunday's readings like last Sunday's are about prayer, not persistence in prayer this week but having humility in the presence of God. In the gospel reading the Pharisee, full of spiritual arrogance, is contrasted with the humble tax collector 'not daring even to raise his eyes to heaven.' The first reading from one of the wisdom books, Ecclesiasticus, teaches us that it is 'the humble man's prayer that pierces the clouds.' In the second reading we have Paul's final words to his brother Timothy.

The **First Reading** is from the book of Ecclesiasticus, one of the Wisdom books found in the Bible. Written originally in Hebrew and then translated into Greek, it is the Greek text which is recognised by the Church as part of the Canon of Scripture. The subscription at the end of the book reads, "Wisdom of Jesus, son of (Ben) Sira" 51.30. At the beginning of the book is a foreword written by the translator, the grandson of Ben Sira, who translated the book into Greek when he went to settle in Egypt c.132 BC. At the time of writing Palestine was under the dominion of the Seleucids, Greek kings, who imposed a Greek way of life, Hellenisation, on the people. It was against these dangerous innovations that Ben Sira wrote to defend the traditions of Israel. He was a scribe who sought both wisdom and respect for the Law. He had a high regard for the Temple, its liturgy and the priestly office. His thought was nourished by reading the sacred books of Israel, especially the Prophets and Wisdom literature. The form of the book resembles previous wisdom books, lacking any apparent order, but it is traditional in that Wisdom which comes from God is rooted in the fear of the Lord, bringing happiness in its wake. The book's original contribution is in identifying Wisdom with the Law of Moses. Ben Sira meditates on the history of salvation reviewing the great personalities throughout the OT. All the kings of Judah and Israel are variously condemned except David, Hezekiah and Josiah, even Solomon receives a severe verdict, yet, Ben Sira is proud of his people's past, the great figures of history and the wonders God worked through them. He gives prominence to the doctrine of the covenant, the promises God made to his people but does not look forward to the coming of a messiah to deliver his people, this will come from fidelity to the Law. In the meantime he accepts his people's situation under Greek domination with humility and peace.

The reading, 35.12-14,16-19, comes from a section which speaks of divine justice. The first part teaches that God treats all people equally although one might say God has a partiality for the poor. The second part deals of the human person who serves God with his whole heart, such a person's prayer 'pierces the clouds' where God dwells. Such a person shows faith because he does not pause or give up until his prayer is heard and as in last week's gospel reading the Lord 'will not be slow nor will he be dilatory on their behalf.'

The **Responsorial Psalm**, Psalm 33.2-3,17-19,23, is an alphabetical wisdom psalm in praise of God's justice which determines the fate of the upright and of the wicked. Apart from the opening two lines of the middle verse which deal with the wicked, the rest of the psalm gives comfort to the upright 'those who hide in him shall not be condemned.'

The **Second Reading** comes from Paul's Second Letter to Timothy. Probably Paul's last letter written in prison in Rome while Timothy must, "Do your best to come and see me as soon as you can" because Paul knows he will not get out of prison alive, "the time has come for me to be gone; I have fought the good fight to the end." Timothy was a convert of Paul's, a constant companion on Paul's missionary journeys. Under Paul's direction Timothy is caring for the churches in Asia, present day Turkey, and he has to deal with some heretics who taught that God was completely unattainable and that Christ should be worshipped as the highest of the angels. Paul taught against this heretical teaching in his letter to the Colossians and now urges Timothy to remain loyal to the Apostolic doctrine he had received and to hand it on to worthy and carefully chosen successors. The apostolic succession has begun.

The reading, 4.6-8,16-18, has Paul describing himself in the evening of his life. He knows like Jesus on the cross when he said, 'It is finished' that he, Paul, has finished the work Jesus gave him to do and he will receive his crown as will all those, says Paul, 'who have longed for his appearing' that is, those while here on earth have longed to be with Jesus in his kingdom and not attached to the attractions of this world. 'The first time I had to present my defence...' possibly the first time Paul had to go to court during his present imprisonment it gave him the chance to proclaim the faith entirely on his own. And he did not feel alone 'the Lord stood by me and gave me power' and Paul was able to preach the gospel message to his accusers. He closes by showing his complete confidence in God, 'To him, Jesus, be glory for ever and ever. Amen.'