

THE THIRY-FIRST SUNDAY OF THE YEAR - C

The cue to this Sunday's readings really comes in the first reading from the book of Wisdom, 'you...overlook men's sins so that they can repent.' This is what Jesus does in the gospel reading. Zacchaeus is not just a tax collector but a senior tax collector, in the eyes of the Israelites even more guilty yet Jesus openly, so that everyone can hear, invites himself to Zacchaeus' house. This for the senior tax collector was an act of reconciliation of which Zacchaeus makes full use. In the first reading from the book of Wisdom the author shows a very good understanding of God's approach to life and forgiveness. In the second reading we begin reading some of Paul's earliest letters. Paul prays for the faith for the Thessalonians and calms their expectations about the return of Christ.

The **First Reading** is from the book of Wisdom. The wisdom literature in the Bible comes after the historical books and comprises the books of Job, the Psalms, the Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, the Song of Songs, the Book of Wisdom and Ecclesiasticus. Wisdom literature flourished throughout the ancient East, it treats of the meaning of life and offers a recipe for successful living. Wisdom literature in Israel came from the same soil and was absorbed in the individual and his destiny but was viewed in the clearer light of the religion of Yahweh. Real wisdom is found in the fear of God since God alone is wise. Wisdom is an outpouring of the glory of the Almighty, an image of his perfection. Wisdom is sure to bring happiness and folly, ruin. This is the doctrine on which the teaching of wisdom is based. All this teaching was preparing for the revelation of Wisdom incarnate as Matthew says: "here is someone greater than Solomon."

The book of Wisdom itself may be divided as follows, the first section, ch.1-5, defines the function of wisdom in man's destiny; the second section, ch.6-9, treats of the origin and nature of wisdom; the last section, ch.10-19, celebrates the part played by Wisdom and by God in the history of the chosen people. The authorship is attributed to Solomon, the wisest king in Israel. The author was an Alexandrian Jew who wrote towards the middle of the 1st century B.C., he commends wisdom, born of God, obtained by prayer, the mainspring of all the virtues. This life is seen as a preparation for another in which the virtuous live with God and the wicked are punished. He sees Wisdom as an attribute of God.

The reading, 11.22-12.2, comes from the section which deals with Wisdom at work in the history of Israel and the author has just been describing God's forbearance with the Egyptians with their practices of pagan worship, he then goes on to explain this forbearance which is the content of our reading. The reading begins by saying that in God's sight 'the whole world is like a grain of dust that tips the scales...yet you are merciful to all' because God 'loves everything that exists.' Nothing disgusts God, his 'imperishable spirit is in everything.' So God corrects and admonishes that all 'may abstain from evil and trust in you, Lord.' The thoughts expressed here were not new in Israel, but never before had the universality of God's compassion for sinners and the decisive role of love in the creation and preservation of beings been expressed with such force. God gradually reveals himself to mankind.

The **Responsorial Psalm**, Psalm 144.1-2,8-11,13-14, is an alphabetical psalm in praise of God which echoes the thoughts expressed in the first reading by praising God for his compassion and faithfulness which leads his 'creatures' to return thanks by declaring God's might.

The **Second Reading** comes from the second letter of St Paul to the Thessalonians. Paul founded the Church in Thessalonica on his 2nd missionary journey in the summer of the year 50. He wrote his first letter to the Thessalonians in the winter of 50/51, some of his earliest writing. In the opening chapters Paul writes very affectionately to his converts now undergoing persecution. In the latter part of the letter he gives some practical suggestions including answers to questions about what happens to people when they die and about Christ's Second Coming (the Parousia). This letter, along with the first one are important because they give us Paul's teaching about the end of time and also Paul's thinking at this time which was, how did Christ's Resurrection from the dead and his Second Coming bring salvation to his converts whether alive or dead?

The reading 1.11-2.2, follows some words of Paul about the Second Coming of Christ 'he will come amid flaming fire' and it is on account of this that the reading begins with Paul praying continually that the Thessalonians will be worthy of his call by completing all that they have been doing through faith. Paul then asks the Thessalonians to think about the Second Coming of Christ but not to get excited too soon by listening to false rumours that Christ has already come again. Paul will have to address this subject again more forcefully.