

THE THIRTY-SECOND SUNDAY OF THE YEAR - C

In this week's gospel reading we have Jesus defending the belief in the resurrection of the dead. The Sadducees who denied the resurrection of the dead test Jesus with a story about a woman who married seven brothers, the next brother after the previous one died. When they all die which one will be her husband in the next life the Sadducees ask? Jesus teaches that marriage lasts until death not beyond the grave so the question has no meaning. Jesus refers them to Moses' (then considered the author of the Pentateuch) teaching and recalls God's words at the burning bush revelation. God is the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and God is God of the living not the dead. The first reading from the Second Book of Maccabees reveals the second son saying: 'you may discharge us from this present life, but the King of the world will raise us up.... to live again for ever.' In the second reading Paul encourages the Thessalonians with the grace of God's sure hope and asks them to pray for him in his work of spreading the Gospel message.

The **First Reading** is from the Second Book of Maccabees. The two books of Maccabees do not appear in the Jewish Canon of Scripture but in a second (deutero) canon of scriptural books recognised by Jews living outside Palestine. The Church has always recognised these books as inspired. 1 & 2 Maccabees treat of the Jewish struggle for religious and political independence against the Seleucid kings, a dynasty of Hellenistic kings which began to rule Palestine in 198 BC. The title of the books comes from the name Maccabaeus conferred on the central figure in the story. 2 Maccabees is in part parallel with 1 Maccabees but covers only fifteen years of the period covered by 1 Maccabees i.e. chapters 1-7. The author writes for Alexandrian Jews to awaken solidarity with their Palestinian brethren. He is particularly concerned to awaken their concern for the Temple around which Jewish life must revolve and against which the fury of the gentile is unleashed. The book opens with two letters of invitation to Egyptians Jews to celebrate the feast of the Dedication of the Temple. There follows a short passage bringing out the inviolable sanctity of the Temple. The first part of the book follows which ends with the death of Antiochus Epiphanes who persecuted the people and desecrated the Temple. The section concludes with the institution of the Feast of Dedication. Part two also deals with a persecutor (Nicanor) who had threatened the Temple and ends with the institution of a commemorative feast. The book was written by Jason of Cyrene c.124BC and is important for its affirmation of the resurrection of the dead, sanctions in the afterlife, prayer for the dead, the spiritual fruits of martyrdom and the intercession of the saints.

The reading, 7.1-2,9-14, follows immediately on the account of the martyrdom of Eleazer, one of the foremost teachers of the Law in Judah. This was all part of the persecution including the desecration of the Temple under Antiochus Epiphanes. The reading covers part of the story of the martyrdom of the seven Maccabean brothers, the whole of chapter seven needs to be read to gain a complete picture. The reading itself shows Jewish belief at the time about the resurrection of the dead to life and that God is the author of creation. The whole of the story gives a clear expression of strong faith and trust in God in the face of terrible persecution.

The **Responsorial Psalm**, Psalm 16.1,5-6,8,15, is a plea, a prayer for the innocent reflecting the thought in the first reading. The prayer begins with requests and then develops giving reasons why God should hear the prayer. Finally the prayer seeks God's protection and ends on a supremely confident note: 'I shall see your face and be filled when I awake (from persecution), with the sight of your glory.'

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, 2.16-3.5, gives Paul's words encouraging the Thessalonians to persevere. The whole passage which begins at 2.13 is firmly Trinitarian. He assures his readers that God has given them 'his love.... and such ceaseless encouragement and such sure hope' so they should be strengthened and encouraged. Then he asks for prayers for himself and his work of spreading the gospel and for preservation from those who oppose his teaching. Paul ends with a prayer for his Thessalonian converts.