

THE FIFTH SUNDAY OF LENT - C

On this fifth Sunday we leave Luke and read from the gospel according to John the story of the woman caught in the act of committing adultery. It is the words of Jesus in this reading which are important for us as we come towards the end of our Lenten preparation. The first reading celebrates God's mighty deeds and the new deed now being realised as the exiles return home. Paul in the second reading teaches that faith in Christ Jesus brings true perfection compared with faith in the old Law.

The **First Reading** comes from the prophet Isaiah. He was a major prophet in Israel but the book which bears his name is not all his work. The reading today comes from the second part of the book, chs.40-55 (Second Isaiah), the work of an unnamed writer, a disciple of Isaiah. This part of the book covers a period of Jewish history 200 years after Isaiah's day when Jerusalem has fallen and the nation is in exile in Babylon. Cyrus, the instrument of God, is about to come and overpower the Babylonian Empire and be the means by which the Israelites are able to return, a new Exodus. Embedded in the book are four passages called the 'Songs of the Servant of Yahweh.' They depict a perfect servant of God who is the light of the nations and gathers in God's people. He is one who preaches the true faith, who expiates people's sins by his own death and is glorified by God. This part of the book, in contrast with the first which is for the most part threatening, is far more consoling as the opening words announce, "Console my people, console them, says your God."

The reading, 43.16-21, is from a chapter which is a prophecy of salvation. Israel has nothing to fear since the choice by God long ago is a guarantee of deliverance. The reading makes this clear saying there is no need to remember past events, the crossing of the Red Sea and the destruction of the Egyptian army. The reading then goes on to describe a new exodus, from Babylon, which will be across the desert in the rainy season. The reading closes with those brought safely home broadcasting God's praises. The first reading on the first Sunday of Lent was a creed and was followed on the next three Sundays with three readings, stepping stones as it were, through the Old Testament the first, the covenant with Abram, the second, God reveals to Moses his name at the burning bush, and the third, the arrival in the Promised Land. Now as we enter the penultimate week of our Lenten preparation Isaiah reminds us that God is to bring about a new deed which for us is 'the new and everlasting covenant.' On the second Sunday at the Transfiguration Jesus was discussing with Moses and Elijah his *exodus* 'which he was to accomplish in Jerusalem.' Through his death and resurrection Jesus sets up this new covenant and realizes his exodus from this world. We are like the Israelites in Babylon in exile as we say in the *Salve Regina* 'to thee do we cry poor banished children of Eve...and after this our exile...' We use the words of Isaiah to remind ourselves of this 'new deed' as he reminded the Israelites in Babylon, and we are, 'The people I have formed for myself (who) will sing my praises.' This is our preparatory thought as we prepare to celebrate this 'new deed.'

The **Responsorial Psalm**, Psalm 125, is one of the songs sung by pilgrims on their way up to Jerusalem. It is a song of the returning exiles for whom, faced with the difficulties of the reconstruction of the city and the Temple, the return from Babylon marks the coming of the messianic age. The psalm describes the joy of the returning exiles they can hardly believe it, it seemed like a dream. God has worked wonders for them and they look forward to sowing their own crops again.

The **Second Reading** is from Paul's letter to the Philippians. Philippi, one of the principal cities of Macedonia, had been evangelised 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 does so in the autumn of 57 and at Passover 58. The letter is almost heart rending showing Paul's love for the Church and in his desire to see them, he writes 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 writes the Philippians a poem on the humility of Christ Jesus, 2.6-11.

This reading, 3.8-14, gives Paul's argument in favour of the uprightness gained through faith in Christ Jesus rather than uprightness embodied in the Law which he has set out in the previous verses. Knowing Christ Jesus my Lord outweighs the loss of everything Paul had as Jewish follower of the Law. With the Law perfection comes through my own efforts, better, says Paul, 'the perfection that comes through faith in Christ, and is from God and based on faith.' Paul is quite certain that sharing in Christ's sufferings by being moulded into the pattern of his death will bring a share in his resurrection but he is not presumptuous, he is still running trying to capture the prize. We too need to follow Paul's example by meditating on Christ's sufferings while still striving to reach the prize that awaits us.