

THE FOURTH SUNDAY OF LENT - C

On this fourth Sunday we have one of the most loved parables of Jesus often called the prodigal son though a better name would be the two sons because the father loses both sons in the story. In the first reading we hear that God has taken away the shame of Egypt from his people who are established now in the land of Canaan. In the second reading Paul speaks of the reconciliation Christ has won for us making us a new creation. This is the reality seen as an image in the first reading when the Israelites, now in the land God promised Abraham would be theirs, are reconciled with God.

The **First Reading** is from the book of Joshua, the book which follows the five books of the Pentateuch, the books of the Law and is followed by the book of Judges. The book of Joshua is in three parts: 1. The conquest of the Promised Land, ch.1-12. 2. The partition of the land between the twelve tribes, ch.13-21. 3. The last days of Joshua, his last discourse and the assembly at Shechem, ch.22-24. Various sources have been used in compiling the book and Jewish tradition does not attribute the book to Joshua. The events recorded in the first part of the book aim to provide, by looking at the past, explanation for facts and situations still observable to the author. The second part of the book in the main gives the geographical location of each tribe's territory with the cities of Judah being listed. The third part brings the book to a conclusion with Joshua's last discourse and the Shechem assembly where the people, now in the Promised Land, renew the Covenant with Yahweh and swear allegiance to the one true God. The book gives the impression that the Promised Land was conquered as a collective tribal effort under Joshua's leadership but the book of Judges gives a different story of individual tribes struggling to survive which is closer to the truth. The Northern tribes settled their territories at some remote time and never went to Egypt but joined the Shechem Assembly and renewed their faith in Yahweh. Throughout the book, idealised and simplified, Joshua remains the heroic figure who leads his people after Moses.

The reading, 5.9-12, marks the end of the desert sojourn for the Israelites. Their escape from Egypt and their struggle to reach the Promised Land is now over God has been faithful to his promise made to their father Abraham which we heard in the first reading for the second Sunday. God was with them all the way a pillar of cloud by day, a pillar of fire by night and all this before Jericho and the rest of Canaan have been conquered. We should see a parallel between the pilgrimage of the Israelites passing through the Red Sea and struggling to reach the Promised Land and our pilgrim journey to our promised land, heaven. We who passed through the waters of baptism now have God's loving guidance as we struggle and hopefully will reach our promised homeland.

The **Responsorial Psalm**, Psalm 33.2-7, is a psalm in praise of God's justice, an alphabetical psalm of thanksgiving. The psalm also shows faith and trust in God and is a good reflection on the first reading when we think of the Israelites beginning to enter the Promised Land. Now they have reached their goal they still need to have faith and trust in God? Are there times when we think we really don't need God we can manage on our own?

The **Second Reading** is from Paul's second letter to the Corinthians. Paul evangelised the church at Corinth between A.D. 50 and 52. His policy was to establish the Christian faith in a centre of population, and here he chose the great and populous port of Corinth, so that the faith could spread to the whole of the province of Achaia. The Christian community grew strong composed mainly of poor people, but Corinth was a centre of Greek life, philosophy and religions. It was also a notorious centre of immorality which was to cause problems for the newly converted. In 2 Corinthians Paul is able to say that the abuses dealt with in his earlier letter had been corrected. In the first main part of the letter he writes magnificently about the dignity of the apostle's mission. Chapters 8-9 deal with collecting money which he illuminates with the ideal of union between the churches. The final section is in the form of an apologia when he is accused of weakness and ambition.

Before the reading, 5.17-21, Paul has been speaking about the apostolate, its importance, its hardships and hopes and in this section the apostolate in action. He has just been saying that the love of Christ is overwhelming when we consider that 'his purpose in dying for all humanity was that those who live should live not any more for themselves but for him who died and was raised to life.' So we should not judge by human standards, here the reading begins, for any one in Christ there is a new creation because God has reconciled us to himself through Christ. Our apostolate says Paul is to hand on this reconciliation, this means that we must let others know that God does not hold their faults against them because they are reconciled through Christ's death. This news has been entrusted to us, as Paul says, we are ambassadors for Christ, and God appeals to the world through us in Christ's name. There is much for us to think about in this reading in this time of renewed effort in Lent.