

THE SEVENTEENTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR - B

If we continue reading Mark from the point where last Sunday's gospel reading ended, we would read Mark's first account of the miracle of the loaves. This Sunday's gospel reading is the account of the miracle of the loaves but from gospel according to John, and for the following four Sundays, we shall continue reading from John's gospel, chapter six, the discourse on the bread of life. Because Mark's gospel is about half the length of Matthew and Luke, John 6 is read at this suitable point in the readings from Mark to enable the current gospel to last through the year. The first reading from the second book of the Kings is an account of a multiplication of loaves in Elisha's day. The second reading continues with Ephesians where Paul is again seeking 'to preserve the unity of the Spirit.'

The **First Reading** is from the second book of Kings, one of the historical books of the Bible. Books 1 and 2 of the Kings are a continuation from books 1 and 2 Samuel, indeed the first two chapters of 1 Kings which deal with the death of king David, are the concluding chapters of 2 Samuel 9-20. The two books of Kings deal with the reign of Solomon, 1 Kings 3-11, his wisdom, his riches, his building programme including the Temple. It was an age of peace but also of exploitation which aggravated the existing hostility between Judah, in the south, and the northern tribes, Israel. On Solomon's death his kingdom split in two and to the political secession of the northern tribes was added religious schism. This was a period of fraternal strife and attacks from outside; Egypt attacked Judah and the Aramaeans (Syria) attacked the northern tribes. This was only a prelude to the fall of Samaria, capital of the North, to the Assyrians in 721 and the fall of Jerusalem to the Babylonian king in 587, followed by Exile. Woven in among these accounts are the Elijah and Elisha cycles, the two great prophets of the period who had much to say about the religious conduct of the kings of the North. After the political division the kings of Israel are all judged guilty of abandoning Temple sacrifice and erecting a shrine of their own at Bethel, and only two kings of Judah receive fulsome praise. All this ran contrary to the teaching of Deuteronomy that the Temple alone was the place for sacrifice and that the nation will be blessed only if it respects God's covenant and it will be punished if it does not.

Today's reading, 4.42-44, is part of a section narrating some miracles of Elisha, the prophet who followed Elijah. It is an isolated passage with little immediate connection with what goes before and follows apart from them being miracles of Elisha. 'A man' comes bringing twenty barley loaves, the first fruits, to Elisha who like Jesus, wishes to feed the people. Elisha's servant, like the disciples of Jesus, has doubts about the quantity of food available. Elisha acts on Yahweh's command just as Jesus always follows his Father's word. In both stories all present are fed and there is food left over showing the bountifulness of God.

The **Responsorial Psalm**, Psalm 144.10-11,15-18, is an alphabetical psalm of praise to God the King. Praise to the God who, 'just in all his ways and loving in all his deeds', provides us with our food.

The **Second Reading** is from Paul's letter to the Ephesians. If you have time read the whole of this wonderful letter, it's only six chapters long. The letter was written while Paul was imprisoned in Rome (61-63 A.D.) and he follows what he taught in Colossians about the subordinate place of the powers of the universe by teaching that God 'has put all things under his (Christ's) feet and made him the head of the Church which is his Body, the fullness of him who is filled, all in all.' He then deals with the continuous problem of Jew and gentile. Salvation is a gift given by God through Christ and this salvation is available equally to Jew and gentile, this shows something of the infinite wisdom of the mystery of God's inexhaustible love. In the last analysis God's plans are seen to be fulfilled in Christ, and in the Church, the extension of Christ through history. This unity in Christ is incompatible with any lack of charity for their attitude to each other is the measure of their attitude to Christ in whom all are one.

Again in today's reading, 4.1-6, Paul is urging the Ephesians to be united in the Spirit, bearing with one another's faults selflessly, gently and charitably. He is insistent that the Church is one Body in the one Spirit. There is one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God in whom we all are one. When we grasp this teaching there is no room for individual selfishness and ambition.