

THE TWENTY-THIRD SUNDAY OF THE YEAR – B

On this Sunday we listen to one of Jesus' healing miracles and the admiration of the crowd but Jesus' miracles should lead to more than admiration the miracles should open the eyes of the mind and lead people to believe. We see something of this in the first reading when Isaiah says, 'Courage! Do not be afraid. Look your God is coming...he is coming to save you.' Isaiah illustrates how the people are to be saved. In the second reading James teaches that we must not despise the poor and favour the rich.

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), which deals with 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 part 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, 35.4-7, is in contrast with the previous chapter in which God passes sentence on Edom because at the time of Judah's misfortune and the fall of Jerusalem, 587, Edom, Israel's neighbour, was particularly hostile to the kingdom of Judah and took advantage of its misfortunes. Our reading, by contrast, gives us a taste of the blessings in store for Israel. God will reek retribution on Israel's enemies and save his people and bring them home. The blessings are listed and they should not necessarily be taken literally. The blind who will have their eyes opened are those who were unable to see the goodness of God formally, the deaf those whose ears were shut to the message of God, the lame are the spiritually lame and the dumb those who formally didn't use their tongues to sing God's praises. Water in the spiritual world gives life as it does in the physical. What the water does in this reading is a symbol of what it does in the spiritual world. As Jesus said to the Samaritan woman, 'the water that I shall give...will become...a spring of water, welling up for eternal life.'

The **Responsorial Psalm**, Psalm 145.7-10, is a reflection on the first reading. The Israelites were still in captivity and the first verse sets out all that God does including setting them free. The rest of the psalm continues this theme recalling all God does for his people.

The **Second Reading** is from the letter of St. James. This is one of the so called universal letters – that is addressed to all Christians not, as in the Pauline letters, addressed to a particular community. This letter was not widely known at first and only came to be accepted into the canon of New Testament scripture near the end of the fourth century. Who exactly James was, is still uncertain, he is not thought to be either of the two James in the apostolic college. The letter is thought to have been written at the end of the first or the beginning of the second century. The letter is addressed to the 'twelve tribes of the Dispersion' i.e. to Jewish Christians scattered over the Graeco-Roman world. It presumes the readers will be familiar with the Old Testament which is not quoted precisely but alluded to in an imprecise fashion. This James is a Judaeo-Christian sage who has rethought the maxims of Jewish Wisdom in the light of Jesus' teachings. The letter is like a sermon advising, on how to behave in time of trial, on the origin of temptation, on how to control the tongue, on good relations and sympathy with one's neighbour, and on the power of prayer. There are two main themes in the book, the first praises the poor and threatens the favoured ones; the second insists that Christians must do good works and not be content with a faith that produces nothing. Faith must be related to good works.

The reading, 2.1-5, gives us more teaching this time about 'the making of distinctions between classes of people.' James says faith in Jesus Christ does not sit at all with the making of such distinctions. He then goes on to give a practical example. He concludes with 'it was those who are poor according to the world that God chose, to be rich in faith and to be heirs to the kingdom.'