

THE TWENTY-NINTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR - B

This Sunday's gospel reading portrays the two sons of Zebedee asking for the best positions with Jesus in his glory. Whether this is earthly or heavenly glory is not clear, but Jesus makes it clear that they do not know what they are asking. They will drink the bitter cup Jesus is to drink, but Jesus can make no promises of this kind. The other disciples are indignant that James and John are trying to steal a march on the rest of them. The first reading concentrates on the bitter suffering to be endured and the second, continuing from Hebrews, encourages us to be confident 'in approaching the throne of grace.'

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, 53.10-11, is part of the fourth song of the servant. The first part of the song, which starts at 52.13, is on the theme of suffering and the persecution the servant will patiently undergo which will scandalise the on-lookers, but the sufferings endured are an expiation for sin. The first verse of our reading is still speaking of the servant's suffering, the second speaks of the favourable outcome for the servant and the justification he has won for the many.

The **Responsorial Psalm**, Psalm 32.4-5,18-20,22, is a hymn to Providence. It could be the prayer of the suffering servant of the first reading. The first verse shows confidence in the Lord who loves justice and righteousness and fills the earth with his love. In the second verse we can think of the servant of God who reveres and hopes in God's love, such a person will be rescued from death and kept alive in famine. The response concludes with a further prayer of belief and hope in God's providence.

The **Second Reading** is from the letter to the Hebrews. This wonderful letter to the Jewish Christians was for a time attributed to Paul's pen but now this is considered not to be the case although he is considered to have had some indirect influence on the letter's contents. It would seem from internal evidence that the letter was written about 67AD. The letter is addressed to Jewish people who have a good knowledge of the covenant God made with their people, and who became Christians. They left Jerusalem and with an uncertain faith, they yearn for the splendour of the ceremonies carried out in the Temple. They are tempted to revert to Judaism, but the writer is intent on preventing this by helping them to see their new life in Christ. They are on a new exodus to the Promised Land (heaven), with Christ, not Moses, as their leader whose one sacrifice on the Cross replaces the many sacrifices of the old priesthood. The letter is a good teaching letter for us showing the harmony between the Old and New Testaments.

The reading, 4.14-16, comes at the end of a section, ch.3&4, where the writer is trying to show the convert Jewish priests that Christ is higher than Moses. Moses was trustworthy as a servant of the household, Jesus is trustworthy as a son over his household, and, as we saw last week, the converts are exhorted to stay faithful to the word of God, because it is like a sharp instrument. They will then come to see that Jesus is the supreme high priest now in heaven and they must hold firm to that belief. They must know that Jesus being man fully understands and shares our condition, although without sin, and that they should be confident in approaching the throne of grace from where they will receive the mercy and grace they need. The writer's words are applicable to us today in every way.