

THE THIRTY-FIRST SUNDAY OF THE YEAR - B

This Sunday's readings draw our minds to the first and most important law of God which has been made part of the law of life since earliest times. First we must love God above all else and flowing from this comes our love of neighbour. As Mark makes clear, this is more important than any sacrifice. The first reading tells us that this law was part of God's revelation. The second reading from Hebrews continues its encouragement of the Jewish converts to see in Jesus the permanent high priest greater than the temporary ones of the old law.

The **First Reading** is from the fifth book of the Law, the book of Deuteronomy. This book as the name suggests is a second law book and is distinct from the other four books of the Law in that, apart from chapters 31 and 34, it comes from a single written tradition: the Deuteronomic. This tradition has a distinctive style and its teaching constantly reaffirms that of all nations in the world, God has, out of pure love, chosen Israel to be his people, but this choice and the Covenant made with his people ratifying this choice are conditional on Israel giving allegiance exclusively to God, and to the prescribed worship to be offered to God in one single place of worship. The book is a code of civil and religious laws which are framed within a long discourse of Moses. The concluding chapters deal with the final days of Moses, the commissioning of Joshua to succeed Moses and Moses' death in sight of the Promised Land. The Deuteronomic code is a partial restatement of the laws promulgated in the desert and recalls the great events of Exodus, of Sinai and of the beginnings of the conquest of the Promised Land. Later the principles of Moses were re-thought by the prophets and adapted to the situation of the Israelites living in Palestine 600 years after Moses. After the fall of Samaria, 721, the book was stored away in the Temple in Jerusalem to be rediscovered in the reign of Josiah, 622. It was re-edited at the beginning of the Exile 587 and came to be regarded as a code of law laid down in his final years by Moses in Moab.

The reading, 6.2-4, comes just after the giving of the Ten Commandments and is teaching that to love God is the essence of the Law. The reading is a fairly easy one to understand but difficult to live out in one's life. We must know from the reading that loving God is not a matter of choice it is a command which if lived out will 'make you prosper and give you great increase...giving you a land where milk and honey flow.' These benefits must be seen in spiritual terms and the land of milk and honey our final destination when we die. Hence these words of the Law need to be 'written on your heart.'

The **Responsorial Psalm**, Psalm 17.2-4,47,51, is a song of thanksgiving. It is a recognition of God as the rock, the fortress, the deliverer, the shield, the stronghold, the place of refuge; a rock in the sense of being the bulwark of his people, the Rock of Israel, so the psalmist exclaims, 'I love you Lord my strength, my rock...' The concept of God, my rock, comes again in the second verse where he is the means by which victory is gained. Again these must be viewed in the spiritual sense.

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, 7.23-28, comes from the section where the writer is teaching his Jewish audience that Christ's priesthood is higher than the Levitical priesthood. Melchizadek 'a priest of God Most High,' is seen as an OT type of Christ, because 'he has no father or mother or ancestry, and his life has no beginning or ending.' He received from Abraham (Gen.14.17-20) a tithe of all that Abraham had captured in battle so Melchizadek is superior to Abraham and all his descendants including those of the Levitical priesthood. Christ is described in Hebrews as 'a priest forever of the order of Melchizadek.' Our reading starts by saying there were 'a great number of priests the under the former covenant,' because being only human they all died, one after another but Christ 'remains forever he can never lose his priesthood' and continues to intercede for all who come to God. Sinful humanity needs a priest who is 'holy, innocent and uncontaminated', such is Christ and he 'has done this once and for all (people) by offering himself.' The writer goes on to explain the high priests of the Law were subject to weakness but the Son, promised to come after the Law, has been made 'perfect for ever.' Perhaps we may think we don't need the argument from the OT to convince us of Christ's perpetual priesthood but it shows how God prepared the human race to receive the Christ.