

## THE THIRTY-SECOND SUNDAY OF THE YEAR – B

In OT times and in Jesus' day widows were an endangered species in the sense that they had no means of obtaining a livelihood and in the gospel reading Jesus commends the widow for putting her last penny into the Temple treasury. In the first reading, through his prophet Elijah, God protects the Sidonian widow supporting her until the rain once again falls on the face of the earth. In the second reading we continue with the letter to the Hebrews and learn how Christ, in contrast to the priests of the old Law, 'offers himself only once to take the faults of many on himself.'

The **First Reading** is from the first book of Kings, one of the historical books of the Bible. Books 1 and 2 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.

The reading, 17.10-16, comes from the Elijah cycle. Elijah foretells a great drought and God sends him to a stream east of the river Jordan where Elijah is fed by the ravens and there is water to drink from the stream. After a while the stream dries up and God then sends the prophet to Zarephath a town in Sidonia and when he reaches the city gate he meets the widow spoken of in our reading. She is about to prepare what she thinks will be the last meal for herself and her son. Elijah requests a share of her food and she obeys God's word received from the mouth of the prophet. Elijah confidently blesses the jar of meal and the jug of oil and both last until the rains return. As in the gospel story we have here a pagan woman listening to the prophet's word, if only Israel had listened to Elijah's teaching.

The **Responsorial Psalm**, Psalm 145.7-10, is a hymn confident of receiving God's help and so we praise him. The psalm is a record of all that God does for those in need, he is just to the oppressed, gives bread to the hungry, sets prisoners free, gives sight to the blind, protects the stranger, upholds the widow and orphan...and so the response: 'My soul give praise to the Lord.' God's beneficence must be seen primarily in spiritual terms.

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, 9.24-28, continues with the theme in last week's reading that is contrasting Christ's priesthood with the priesthood of the OT priests. The OT priests entered a man-made sanctuary in the Temple which was only modelled on the real one, heaven itself in the presence of God which is the sanctuary Christ entered when he returned to the Father. Christ's sacrifice is eternally present before the Father so unlike the OT priest who had to go 'into the sanctuary year after year,' Christ offers himself once only for all mankind and this eternal offering on our behalf is there 'in the actual presence of God.' When Christ comes again, sin having been done away with by Christ's sacrifice, he 'will manifest himself a second time, sin being no more, to those who are waiting for him, to bring them salvation.'