

THE THIRD SUNDAY IN LENT - A

Water, the symbol of life, is the thread running through today's first reading and gospel reading. In the gospel reading the woman at the well wants the living water Jesus says he can give her and is gradually brought by Jesus to believe that Jesus himself is this living water. In the first reading the Israelites have yet to learn that the God who brought them out of the land of Egypt will not leave them to die of thirst in the desert. In the second reading Paul teaches us that through Jesus' death the love of God has been poured, like water, into our hearts.

The **First Reading** is from the book of Exodus, the second book in the Bible and the second book of the Law. This book has two main themes: the birth and call of Moses and the deliverance of the Israelite people from Egypt, and then the Covenant God made with the Israelites at Mt Sinai through Moses, and the laws that flow from the Covenant itself, the two are connected by the journey through the desert. Like the book of Genesis, Exodus is a compilation of three earlier documents and our reading today comes from the Yahwistic tradition. This tradition has a lively and vivid style and although God is described in human terms the author has a deep sense of the divine.

The reading, 17.3-7, comes from the journey through the desert, after the passage through the Red Sea and before the Ten Commandments were given at Mt Sinai. Where the Israelites pitch camp, at Rephidim, there is no water and the people, tormented by thirst, demand water to drink. Fearing almost for his life Moses appeals to God who takes him to the rock at Horeb where on God's instructions Moses strikes the rock and water is provided. This is one of several episodes when the Israelites complained to Moses. Through the association of ideas God is seen as the Rock of Israel, Psalm 18 says: 'The Lord is my rock....I take refuge in him, my rock.' Here King David sees God as his deliverer. For the Israelites in the desert God delivers them from natural thirst. This story can almost be seen as a parable for when our life in God has run dry we must turn to him, follow his instructions and receive the water of life. (See Numbers 20.1-13.)

The **Responsorial Psalm**, Psalm 94 is a psalm of adoration and is used as the introductory prayer in the Prayer of the Church every day. A psalm of adoration: 'let us bow and bend low; let us kneel before the God who made us.' The third stanza recalls the events of the first reading, we must not harden our hearts towards God, lacking faith, putting God to the test, trying him out, rather we must 'listen to his voice.'

The **Second Reading** is from Paul's letter to the Christians in Rome. Paul had not founded the Church in Rome but intended to visit the Christians there on his way to Spain. This huge letter, with much detailed teaching, written in the winter 57/58, is difficult to summarise. The community in Rome was a mixture of Jewish and non-Jewish converts and there was a danger that they would look down on each other. Some of the converts from Judaism wanted pagan converts to be circumcised to ensure salvation. Paul maintained that this made nonsense of Christ's redemptive work. The Law was good and holy but made those who kept the Law aware of their need for God's help. This help has now been given in Christ Jesus.

In the reading, 5.1-2,5-8, Paul, having dealt with the question of justification, teaches that we are not justified by keeping the Law of the Old Testament but by faith in God, like Abraham. He now re-emphasises this teaching saying that faith guarantees salvation and for the Christian the proof of this is that by our faith in Jesus 'we have entered this state of grace' and 'the love of God has been poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit which has been given us.' The total conviction of Paul saying he can prove God loves us, comes out in his teaching. The utter certainty of salvation for those who believe, and have faith, in Jesus, is Paul's teaching today.