

THE THIRD SUNDAY OF THE YEAR - C

On this third Sunday we read Luke's opening statement at the beginning of his gospel and Jesus' opening statement in the Nazareth synagogue at the beginning of his Galilean ministry. Luke says he wants to give an ordered account of events that the reader may understand that the teaching he sets down is well founded. Jesus in the synagogue wants to help the people of his village understand the purpose and nature of his ministry. In the first reading we hear how the people of Israel wish to make a fresh start after breaking God's Law which led them into exile. In the second reading Paul spells out to the Corinthians that we are all part of Christ's body dependant on each other.

The **First Reading** is from the book of Nehemiah. This book is closely associated with the book of Ezra because in the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible, the Book of Ezra-Nehemiah was known as Esdras II and in the Christian period it was divided into two and this division was used by the Vulgate, the old Douai Version of the Bible. The two books are a continuation of the Chronicler's work in the two books of Chronicles which precede them. The Chronicler is completely silent about the Exile 587-538 and picks up the story of Israel with the edict of Cyrus II who conquered the Babylonian Empire and enabled the Israelites to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the Temple. The rebuilding was interrupted by the hostility of the Samaritans and not resumed until the reign of Darius I (c.520). The Temple was finished in 515. When the walls of the city were to be rebuilt the Samaritans again hindered the work. Ezra, the real father of Judaism, returns to the city from Persia with more exiles, date uncertain, with authority to impose the Mosaic Law. On Nehemiah's arrival the walls of the city are completed and the city is re-inhabited. The Law is solemnly read by Ezra, the people confess their sins and promise to observe the Law. The books record the birth of Judaism built on three concepts: the chosen race, the Temple, the Law prepared for by many years of meditation in exile.

The reading, 8.2-6,8-10, speaks of a new beginning after exile. Ezra brings the Law before the people assembled in front of the Water Gate, not on sacred ground and the Law is read and explained so that the people understood. We can recall that Moses first read the Law to the Israelites in the Sinai desert as they made a fresh start after escaping from Egypt. Joshua read the Law to the people once they had arrived in the Promised Land and renewed the Covenant as again they made a fresh start. Now led by Ezra the people again promise fidelity to the Law as they begin life again after exile. The people are told to go and rejoice and as we begin a new year with joy we must rededicate ourselves to the service of God's Law.

The **Responsorial Psalm**, Psalm 18.8-10,15, celebrates Yahweh as creator of the heavens and the author of the Law, nature and the Law both manifest the perfection of God. In the ancient East the sun, the centre piece of the heavens, symbolised justice so nature and Law sit happily with each other in this psalm. The section we have is about the Law of God and the first three verses speak in praise of God's Law, his decrees, his precepts, his commands and should lead to a respectful fear/awe of the Lord. Finally the psalm wishes that the words from our mouths fulfilling God's Law find favour with God our Saviour and rescuer from death, a prayerful response to the reading.

The **Second Reading** is from Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. Paul evangelised the church at Corinth between A.D. 50 and 52. His policy was to establish the Christian faith in a centre of population, and here he chose the great and populous port of Corinth, so that the faith could spread to the whole of the province of Achaia. The Christian community grew strong composed mainly of poor people, but Corinth was a centre of Greek life, philosophy and religions, it was also a notorious centre of immorality which was to cause problems for the newly converted. In 1Corinthians Paul addresses urgent problems that faced the church there and the decisions that had to be made to address these problems such as moral conduct, of marriage and virginity, of liturgical and Eucharistic meetings, of charisms, of matters concerning the Church and the world, appeals to civil courts, eating foods sacrificed to idols. Paul's religious genius enabled him to use all these problems as a vehicle to expound the profound doctrines of Christian liberty, the sanctification of the body, the supremacy of love, union with Christ. Paul teaches the Corinthians that there is only one master, Christ, and only one message, the cross and there is only one true wisdom.

The reading, 12.12-30, Paul teaches the Corinthians that that they are all one in Christ after their disgraceful behaviour at a Eucharistic celebration he spoke about in the previous chapter. This reading also confirms that the different gifts of the Spirit, referred to in last week's second reading, are given to help bind us all together in Christ. He presents an analogy of the body. Just as the body has various parts each with its own part to play and the body needs each part and requires each part to carry out its role so that the body functions efficiently and all the parts go to make up one body so in the Body of Christ there are different members each with an important part to play in the Body and all the parts go to make one body. As division in the natural body causes harm division in the Body of Christ causes harm too.