

THE EIGHTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR – B

On this Sunday we have another of the conflict stories recorded by Mark in which the Pharisees take Jesus to task because while they fast as do John the Baptist's disciples Jesus' disciples do not. Jesus gives answer, he is like a bridegroom who is teaching his disciples how to be new wine skins so that they are ready to accept the new wine i.e. the new teaching Jesus brings. The OT ways are like a shadow and the disciples must learn to leave the shadows behind and walk in the light of Christ. While they are being taught they will not fast says Jesus. In the first reading Hosea explains the bridegroom concept and in the second reading Paul shows the work of the Spirit in the Corinthian community.

The **First Reading** is from the prophet Hosea who was a native of the Northern Kingdom and a contemporary of Amos. His ministry began in the reign of Jeroboam II (783-743) but he did not live to see the fall of Samaria to the Assyrians in 721. The painful experiences of his own married life were to condition his ministry. He loves his wife but she deserts him; his love remains, however, and, having put her to the test, he takes her back. His experience becomes a symbol of God's relationship with Israel, the bride of God. Israel has become a faithless harlot, has aroused the anger and jealousy of her divine husband, but, like Hosea, God's love remains. He will punish Israel but only to bring her back. For the first time God's relationship with Israel is described in terms of a marriage the underlying theme being that divine love is misunderstood by the people on whom it is lavished. Once the golden period of the desert was over Israel played false. Hosea indicts the kings, the priests and holds that the worship at Bethel is idolatrous worship where Yahweh is coupled with Baal and Astarte in the licentious rites of the high places. Yahweh says through his prophet, 'What I want is love, not sacrifice; knowledge of God, not burnt offerings.' Punishment is sure to come but Yahweh will welcome his repentant people back. The prophecy had a profound effect on the OT see later prophets with their exhortations to a religion of the heart. The wedding image is used by Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Isaiah II and the NT and the early Church apply it to the union between Christ and his Church.

The reading, 2.16,17,21-22, is from chapter two which draws the moral and at the same time provides the key to the whole book. The chapter may be given three headings: hope for the future, Yahweh and his unfaithful wife and reconciliation and our reading comes from this final section. It begins with Yahweh saying he is going to 'lure' or 'seduce' Israel from the course she should have followed and take her back to the desert i.e. the desert life of the Exodus from Egypt which for the Israelites represents a lost ideal. A time when Israel knew nothing of foreign gods and followed Yahweh faithfully and there God will 'speak to her heart' and then Israel 'will respond to me as she did when she was young.' The reading continues 'I shall betroth you to myself.' The word 'betroth' is used in the Bible only with reference to a young virgin. Thus God abolishes Israel's adulterous past and this new marriage is with a new creature who is as constant as God himself, (these ideas are developed by Jeremiah in the new covenant). The 'faithful love and tenderness' means for Hosea the tender love God has for his people and the benefits deriving from such love, for us on our part it calls for a corresponding love which is a joyful submission to the will of God and an active charity towards one's neighbour.

The **Responsorial Psalm**, Psalm 102.1-4,8,10,12-13, manifests the love of God and all that that means with the opening verse saying we should give thanks to the Lord. A good reflection on the first reading.

The **Second Reading** is from Paul's second letter to the Corinthians. Paul evangelized the Church at Corinth between 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 2 Corinthians Paul is able to say that the abuses dealt with in his earlier letter had been corrected. In the first, main part of the letter he writes magnificently about the dignity of the apostle's mission. Chapters 8-9 deal with collecting money which he illuminates with the ideal of union between the churches. The final section is in the form of an apologia when he is accused of weakness and ambition.

The reading, 3.1-6, begins with Paul saying he needs no letters of commendation from his communities like other preachers (possibly Judaizers) because the churches founded by him and animated by the Spirit make a written commendation unnecessary. In other words the life of the community animated by the Spirit is sufficient commendation, Paul refers to them as 'a letter from Christ...written not with ink but the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone, but on...your living hearts.' Paul claims confidence for his assertions 'through Christ...all our qualifications come from God.' Paul says it is God who has given him the where withal 'to be the ministers of this new covenant' a covenant 'of the Spirit' not written in letters for 'the written letters bring death, but the Spirit brings life.' The contrast here is between the written external Law of the OT, written on tablets of stone and unable to effect eternal salvation, and the Spirit, the interior law of the heart in the NT which is able to bring salvation to all believers.