

THE THIRTEENTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR – A

The gospel reading teaches to renounce self and follow Jesus and brings to a close the lengthy instruction given by Jesus before the Twelve begin their mission. The second reading from the Elisha cycle tells how a childless woman who provided shelter for the prophet is rewarded, 'This time next year, Elisha said, you will hold a son in your arms.' In the second reading Paul teaches us that in baptism we die and join Jesus in his tomb so that like him we might rise to a new life

The **First Reading** is from the second 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, 4.8-11,14-16, is part of the lovely story of the Shunem woman. We have only the first part of the story telling us how this 'woman of rank' provided the prophet Elisha with a meal whenever he passed her house. Recognising him as 'a holy man of God' she and her husband built a room for him and furnished it. When Elisha came again he rested there and rewarded the woman saying; 'this time next year you will hold a son in your arms.' (For the complete story read 2Kgs.8-37.) God rewards her belief in and kindness to his prophet.

The **Responsorial Psalm**, Psalm 88.2-3,16-19, is a hymn and a prayer to God the faithful. The first verse sets the scene, I will sing of God's love, proclaim your truth because your love is everlasting your truth firmly established. Those 'who acclaim such a king' will find joy for it is 'you, O Lord, who are the glory of their strength....that our might is exalted' because the Holy One of Israel watches over all.

The **Second Reading** is from Paul's letter to the Christians in Rome. Paul had not founded the Church in Rome but he intended to visit the Christians there on his way to Spain. This huge letter, with much detailed teaching, is difficult to summarize. 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 their salvation. Paul maintained 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 of God's help. This help has now been given in Christ Jesus which is explained in some detail.

The reading, 6.3-4,8-11, gives part of Paul's teaching on baptism which is not contrasted with faith but goes with faith and gives faith an outward expression in the symbolism of the ceremony of baptism. At baptism the sinner is immersed in water and thus 'buried with Christ' and when he/she emerges from the water as Christ emerged from the tomb they do so as a new creation. (When Paul was writing baptism was by immersion.) Paul continues: we believe that Christ died once is raised to new life 'and will never die again.' He concludes saying that just as Christ is alive 'and now the life that he lives is life with God, in the same way, you must see yourselves as being dead to sin but alive for God in Christ Jesus .' Paul's belief in the new life that is realised through the symbolism of the baptismal washing is very strong and basic to all his teaching.