

THE NINETEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME - A

This Sunday we read Matthew's account of Jesus who after spending time in prayer comes walking on the storm tossed waters of the lake. Peter assured by Jesus words walks across the water to Jesus and his faith is tested, once back in the safety of the boat all the disciples acknowledge Jesus to be the Son of God. In the first reading Elijah walks until he reaches Horeb, the mountain of God, where he finds God's presence in the sound of a gentle breeze. The second reading continues from Paul's letter to the Romans where he begins to set out the position of the Israelites in the economy of salvation.

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.

The reading 19.9,11-13 comes from the Elijah cycle and is part of a much longer story (see 1Kings 18-19). Briefly there is a contest on Mount Carmel between the four hundred prophets of Baal, a pagan Canaanite weather god, and Elijah. Having won the contest Elijah executes all the pagan prophets and this incurs the wrath of Queen Jezebel. Elijah flees for his life into the desert south of Judah and, after a day's journey, sitting under a furze bush, wishes he were dead. Strengthened by God, Elijah continues his journey until he reaches Horeb. This is the mountain on which God revealed himself to Moses and gave him the Ten Commandments. Elijah, ever zealous for the Covenant, wishing to restore Israel's ancient faith and to continue the work of Moses, has returned to this sacred place. He spends the night in a cave on the mountain and God asks Elijah what he is doing there. Elijah says he is full of zeal for God and his Covenant and tells God about the apostasy of the Israelite people, how they have killed all the other prophets. Then, here the reading begins, God tells Elijah to go out and stand on the mountain for God is passing by, there followed a mighty wind, earthquake and fire, but God was not present in any of these signs. Then there came a gentle breeze and Elijah covers his face for God is present in the gentle breeze. God tells Elijah to go back and he is told what to do.

The **Responsorial Psalm**, Psalm 84. 9-14, is a prayer promising the returning exiles the peace and justice of the messianic age foretold by Isaiah and Zechariah. In the first stanza the Lord God speaks of peace and will give help to his people and his glory will return to the restored Temple. The next stanza speaks of the personified attributes of God, mercy, faithfulness, justice and peace, these will inaugurate the Kingdom of God on earth in human hearts. This God gives prosperity and good harvests, his saving justice treads out a path which is the condition of peace and happiness.

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. 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 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.

In the reading, 9.1-5, Paul begins to set out his argument concerning the position of Israel. The theme of salvation as a free gift of God through the Spirit demands that Paul consider the case of Israel, chs.9-11, a people who have not responded with faith although given the promise of salvation. Paul begins by saying his heart is full of sorrow and unremitting agony. He would be prepared to cut himself off from Christ if that could be of any benefit to his Jewish brethren, all descendants of their father Jacob. He then lists all that they have received from God: adopted as God's children, the covenants, the Law, the worship of God and his promises. They are the descendants of the Fathers of our race from whom, physically, 'came Christ who is above all, God for ever blessed! Amen.' Paul continues his teaching through the next two chapters. For us today it surely teaches us what we owe to those of the Jewish family who remained faithful to God and his promises.