

THE FOURTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR - A

Matthew has divided his gospel into five sections, leaving out the birth stories and the Passion account, possibly corresponding to the five books of the Jewish Law, the Pentateuch. Each section has narrative section followed by a section of teaching and this week we begin to read the first of Matthew's teaching sections, the Sermon on the Mount, ch.5-7. This inaugural sermon explaining the new spirit of the kingdom of God begins by setting down the spirit in which the children of the kingdom should live. Today we listen to the Beatitudes. In the first reading we listen the prophet Zephaniah encouraging the 'humble of the earth' to seek God and in the second reading we continue with Paul's letter to the Corinthians where he teaches them that they may not be considered much in the eyes of the world with little to boast about but they must know they have been chosen by God so they can 'boast about the Lord.'

The **First Reading** is from the prophet Zephaniah who worked in the reign of Josiah, 640-609, but before he had begun his religious reform, 640-630. The book falls into four short sections: the Day of Yahweh, prophecies against the nations, prophecies against Jerusalem, the promises. Zephaniah's message is a prophecy of the Day of Yahweh (spoken of by the prophet Amos), of a catastrophe affecting not only Judah but also the nations. Judah's rebellious pride has led to religious and moral corruption for which she is condemned. Zephaniah has a deep sense of sin, developed in Jeremiah it is an offence against the living God. The punishment of the nations should serve as a warning, 3.6-8, and bring God's people back to humble obedience for salvation is promised only to a humble and submissive remnant.

The reading, 2.3, 3.12-13, is in two parts: the first is from the call to conversion at the end of Zephaniah's words on the Day of Yahweh. The 'humble of the earth,' the '*anawim*' (those who become poor for the sake of others) are those Israelites who submit to the will of God. It is such as these who 'may perhaps find shelter on the Day of Yahweh's anger.' The second part comes from the last section of the prophecy, the Promises, where Zephaniah is speaking of the humble remnant of Israel and it is connected with the first part of this reading as the opening words proclaim, 'When that Day comes...' This reading prophesies that the ideal that 'you may perhaps find shelter on the day of Yahweh's anger' will become a reality and we are given one of the most perfect descriptions of the 'spirit of poverty' in the OT, a humble and lowly people who will do no wrong, tell no lies and commit no perjury. It is such people who live the teachings of the Beatitudes in the gospel reading.

The **Responsorial Psalm**, Psalm 145.7-10, a hymn to the God of help, is the first Psalm to the third Hallel, i.e. prayers and litanies (see Ps 113-118, 136 & 146-150) which the Jews recited at Passover and other great feasts. The section we recite is in praise of God for all that he does, he keeps faith forever, is just to the oppressed, gives bread to the hungry, sets prisoners free.....and on to the end of the psalm.

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, only one message, the cross which is the only true wisdom.

The reading, 1.26-31, develops the point in the above notes that the community in Corinth was composed mainly of poor people those who in Paul's words were not considered 'wise by human standards, not many influential, not many from noble families.' And Paul goes on to say that God chose those who in the eyes of the world were considered fools, weak, common and contemptible to shame the wise and the strong and also God chose 'those who count for nothing--to reduce to nothing all those that do count for something.' Why has God done this? Paul's answer is that no one should be boastful before God because it is through God that we exist 'in Christ Jesus who for us was made wisdom from God, and saving justice, holiness and redemption.' Those who formerly in the eyes of the world did not exist now exist in Christ Jesus, while those the world sees as existing are reduced to nothing. Paul is speaking about a new existence in Christ Jesus, received at baptism, and it is this new existence in Christ along with Christian wisdom which is not the fruit of human effort but found in that one member of the human race namely Christ whom we must win because in Christ are found all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge of God. This wisdom is that of an all-embracing salvation, 'saving justice, holiness and redemption' thus Paul concludes: 'If anyone wants to boast, let him boast of the Lord.'

