

THE ELEVENTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR – B

The gospel reading gives us two of Jesus' parables about the Kingdom of God, the first teaching that God's Kingdom grows imperceptibly and the second teaches that the Kingdom can start from impossibly small beginnings. The first reading prepares us for the second parable, a small shoot taken from the top of a very tall tree when planted by God will grow, bear fruit and every kind of bird will live in the tree. In the second reading Paul tells us we should want to be exiled from our body so that we can be with the Lord.

The **First Reading** is from the prophet Ezekiel, one of the major prophets of Israel. It is thought his whole ministry was among the exiles in Babylon. The exile lasted from 587-538 B.C. Called by God to maintain the faith of the Israelites during this traumatic period of Jewish history, Ezekiel's entire teaching centres on inner conversion: we must achieve a new heart and a new spirit, see Ezk.36.26. The Temple was his ruling interest and he holds the Law in veneration. Ezekiel is primarily a visionary, his four visions occupy a substantial part of the book. The Messiah is not to be a king but a shepherd who will look for individual rather than collective reparation. The book is divided into four parts: 1.Threats and reproaches addressed to the Israelites. 2.Proclamations against the nations. 3.Comfort during and after the siege of Jerusalem. 4.Provisions for a new political and religious constitution after the Exile.

The reading, 17.22-24, is the last part of an allegory which the prophet is to 'propound to the House of Israel.' In the first part Nebuchadnezzar, in 597 B.C., deports Jehoiachin from Jerusalem to Babylon and puts Zedekiah on the throne, a puppet king. But Zedekiah seeks help from Egypt against Nebuchadnezzar and God foretells his downfall. Then Yahweh God speaks and we have today's reading. God says 'from the top of the cedar tree...I shall take a shoot and plant it myself on a high and lofty mountain,' the shoot will grow into a noble cedar and all the birds of the air will find shelter there. This refers to the future restoration of Israel in the messianic age.

The **Responsorial Psalm**, Psalm 91.2-3,13-16, is a song of the upright, a hymn which develops the traditional doctrine of the Sages: happiness for the just and ruin for the impious and with reference to the reading we have the refrain 'The just will flourish like the palm-tree and grow like a Lebanon cedar.'

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, 5.6-10, comes from the concluding part of the section where Paul is speaking about the hardships and hopes of the apostolate but he is full of confidence. While we remain in the body 'we are exiled from the Lord guided by faith and not yet by sight.' Paul repeats 'we are full of confidence' hoping to be exiled from the body 'to be at home with the Lord.' Paul concludes it must be our ambition to please God because when we come to 'the judgement seat of Christ' we will be judged according to our deeds, good or bad.