

THE FIFTEENTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR - B

The gospel reading gives us Jesus' instructions to the Twelve as he sent them out, like Amos in the first reading, on their first mission. They are given authority by Jesus for their teaching and those who refuse to accept this authoritative teaching, are to be shown the errors of their ways. In the first reading the prophet Amos is told to 'Go away.' He is from the south, the land of Judah and is not accepted in the north, in Israel. The second reading is the wonderful opening passage, the Mystery of Salvation and of the Church, from the letter to the Ephesians.

The **First Reading** is from the prophet Amos, one of twelve minor-prophets whose words are recorded in the Bible. A sheep farmer in the Judean desert, Amos was called by God to prophesy in Israel. He preached during the reign of Jeroboam II, 783-743, during which the Northern Kingdom grew wealthy, the poor were exploited, and the spectacular liturgy at the Bethel shrine lacked true worship of God. Amos preached at this schismatic shrine and also in Samaria. He was very direct in his approach and in the name of God he condemned corrupt city life, social injustice and deceitful liturgies. For Amos, Yahweh, the God of Israel, was sovereign Lord of all the world, and Yahweh's Day would come when Israel would suffer God's vengeance at the hands of the Assyrians. Yet all is not lost, Amos looks forward to the salvation of the House of Joseph. He proclaims his profound belief in an all-powerful and universal Lord without any hesitation. He looks for an Israel whose belief and worship of God are what was promised to God in the beginning, pure Yahwism. Like all the prophets his teaching was rejected, he was expelled and he returned to his sheep.

The reading, 7.12-15, comes between the third and fourth vision in the chapter. The third vision is of a plumb-line which is used to measure the house of Israel and as a result of his findings God will lay waste the sanctuaries of Israel and attack the house of Jeroboam. Amaziah, the high priest, sends word to king Jeroboam telling him of the threats contained in Amos' prophecy. Now our reading begins with Amaziah telling the prophet, 'Go away, seer.' Amos is told to return to his own country, Judah, and prophesy there. He will never again prophesy in Bethel, the royal sanctuary. Amos is not accused of being a false prophet and it would seem Amaziah fears the consequences of Amos' prophecy. Amos replies saying he is not a prophet, that is, he does not belong to a group of prophets or a prophetic brotherhood. He tells Amaziah his origins and says it was the Lord who said, 'Go, prophesy to my people Israel.' Every true prophet is certain of his credentials.

The **Responsorial Psalm**, Psalm 84.9-14, is a confident prayer for the justice and peace of the messianic age promised to the returned exiles. The verses repeat this assurance for justice and peace, a good response to Amos.

The **Second Reading** is from Paul's letter to the Ephesians. If you have time read the whole of this wonderful letter, it's only six chapters long. The letter was written while Paul was imprisoned in Rome (61-63 A.D.) and he follows what he taught in Colossians about the subordinate place of the powers of the universe by teaching that the Church as the Body of Christ embraces the whole of the new universe, 'the fullness of him who is filled, all in all.' He then deals with the continuous problem of Jew and gentile. Salvation is a gift given by God through Christ and this salvation is available equally to Jew and gentile, this shows something of the infinite wisdom of the mystery of God's inexhaustible love. In the last analysis God's plans are seen to be fulfilled in Christ, and in the Church the extension of Christ through history. This unity in Christ is incompatible with any lack of charity, for their attitude to each other is the measure of their attitude to Christ in whom all are one.

Today's reading, 1.3-14, is one of the greatest passages in Paul's writing. Apart from the opening greetings, this is the beginning of the letter. The prayer starts by acknowledging God as 'the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ' and then Paul immediately brings us up to a heavenly plain with 'the spiritual blessings of heaven in Christ.' Notice how many times Paul refers to Christ in this passage. The spiritual blessings follow: first, we are chosen in Christ; second, we are 'to be adopted sons, through Christ Jesus.' 'His grace' at the end of the verse, is God's favours and God's glory which are a grace, freely given. The third gift is 'the forgiveness of sins,' our freedom which we gain through Christ's blood. In verse 8 'he' refers to God the Father who 'has let us know the mystery of his purpose', the fourth blessing. Verse 10 carries the main theme of the letter, the whole body of creation lost to sin is now reborn in Christ, 'and it is in him we have received our heritage', the fifth blessing. And the sixth blessing is 'Now you too' (that is non-Jews) 'in him' (Christ), have heard the message of truth and the gospel of your salvation.' The final gift, 'you have been stamped with the seal of the Holy Spirit of the Promise,' will be given when the Kingdom of God is complete.