

THE FOURTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR – B

In this Sunday's gospel reading we listen to the opening of Jesus' public ministry. Jesus has come to Capernaum, the centre for his Galilean ministry and in the synagogue on the Sabbath he teaches and heals with authority which makes a deep impression on the people. In the first reading we hear Moses telling the Israelites, 'Yahweh your God will raise up a prophet like me; you will listen to him.' In the second reading we listen to Paul comparing married life with the life of those who remain single.

The **First Reading** is from the fifth book of the Law, the book of Deuteronomy. This book as the name suggests is a second law book and is distinct from the other four books of the Law in that, apart from chapters 31 and 34, it comes from a single written tradition: the Deuteronomic. This tradition has a distinctive style and its teaching constantly reaffirms that of all nations in the world, God has, out of pure love, chosen Israel to be his people, but this choice and the Covenant made with his people ratifying this choice are conditional on Israel giving allegiance exclusively to God, and to the prescribed worship to be offered to God in one single place of worship. The book is a code of civil and religious laws which are framed within a long discourse of Moses. The concluding chapters deal with the final days of Moses, the commissioning of Joshua to succeed Moses and Moses' death in sight of the Promised Land. The Deuteronomic code is a partial restatement of the **laws** promulgated in the desert and recalls the great events of Exodus, of Sinai and of the beginnings of the conquest of the Promised Land. Later the principles of Moses were re-thought by the prophets and adapted to the situation of the Israelites living in Palestine 600 years after Moses. After the fall of Samaria, 721, the book was stored away in the Temple in Jerusalem to be rediscovered in the reign of Josiah, 622. It was re-edited at the beginning of the Exile 587 and came to be regarded as a code of law laid down in his final years by Moses in Moab.

The reading, 18.15-20, is part of the Deuteronomic Code where the writer is speaking about the Israelites future life in the Promised Land. They are warned just before our reading begins: 'you must not learn to imitate the detestable practices of the nations already there,' i.e. the Canaanites and further warnings follow. To help them stay faithful to the Sinai Covenant we have the first sentence of the reading, 'Yahweh your God will raise up a prophet like me; you will listen to him.' This what they asked at Sinai because God's words and presence were too much for them and God promises 'I will raise up a prophet like yourself (Moses) for them...and he will tell them everything I command him.' The Israelites must listen to the prophet's words because they are from God. False prophets will be condemned. This is the institution of the prophetic office ascribed by Moses to Yahweh at Sinai. The Jewish expectation of a Messiah-Prophet, a second Moses, is based on this passage.

The **Responsorial Psalm**, Psalm 94.1-2,6-9, is the psalm used each day at the beginning of the Church's prayer and is an invitation to praise God, it is a processional hymn perhaps recited at the feast of Shelters (wine and olive harvest). The 'rock' in the second line could be a reference to the rock that yielded water in the desert or the rock on which the Temple was built. In the final verse *meribah* means 'contention' and *massah* means 'trial' referring to the occasion in the desert when the Israelites were contentious and put Yahweh to the test saying, 'Is Yahweh with us, or not?' (See Exodus 17.1-7.)

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 1 Corinthians 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, marriage and virginity, liturgical and Eucharistic meetings, charisms, 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 for the profound doctrine 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, and only one message, the cross which is the one true wisdom.

In the reading, 7.32-35, Paul contrasts married life with that of the celibate and seems to imply that married life has its worries while the celibate, man or woman, is 'free from all worry.' Paul teaches, 'An unmarried man can devote himself to the Lord's affairs all he need worry about is pleasing the Lord,' whereas 'a married man has to bother about the world's affairs and devote himself to pleasing his wife.' The impression given by Paul is that a married man cannot be serving the Lord when he is bothered with the world's affairs and pleasing his wife but the wider picture must be appreciated. It is true here Paul would seem to commend celibacy as a more complete way of serving the Lord but in the letter to the Ephesians Paul compares the love a man has for his wife with the love Christ has for the Church. 'This is why a man leaves father and mother and becomes attached to his wife, and the two become one flesh. This mystery,' says Paul, 'has great significance, but I am applying it to Christ and the Church.' Paul is saying Christ is married to the Church and the two become one, the love of a man for his wife is an image of the love of Christ for his Church. Such is married love in Paul's eyes.

