**SECOND SUNDAY OF YEAR A**

**15th January 2023**

**First Reading Isaiah 49:3.5-6**

This reading is part of the second Servant Song. (See last week for the first). The servant declares that before birth, he was chosen and set apart by God for a determined purpose: to bring Israel, God's people, back to him, to lead them from sin and unfaithfulness to a life worthy of their vocation.

But it is not the whole of his mission. He is to go beyond Israel. The servant would carry the light of revelation to the pagans and bring salvation to all men and women, to the very ends of the earth.

Here is one of the most universalist passages of the Old Testament. Exile among the Zoroastrian Babylonians brought Israel's prophets to realise that redemption was not only for Jews. Christians perceive that the prophecy was fulfilled in Christ.

Strictly, prophecy is not predicting the future but relaying what God is saying, which has included threats for disobedience. Humanly speaking, it is impossible to reconcile God’s omnipotence with human freedom of choice and moral responsibility.

The sixth line of our ‘song’ claims that the servant was deliberately formed in the womb to reconcile Jacob and from 150 A.D. the Mother of Jesus was claimed to have been preserved from original sin. Augustine taught that some Christians had been earmarked from the beginning for salvation. Such forward planning seems to remove our ability to make and decisions, but this was never suggested until the time of John Calvin and the Reformation.

I find it difficult but such an idea of predestination must not be allowed to harden into an abstract dogma but must be allowed to remain at the level of what it is in the Bible—an expression of faith in every situation. It is this fact that expresses itself in the annunciation and infancy narratives of the Gospels.

**Responsorial Psalm: 39:2, 4 & 7-10**

This is a personal psalm of thanksgiving for deliverance from misfortune. The psalmist is determined to give thanks not only with his lips but also in his life. He offers his will in obedience to the will of God. This, he says, is what God desires, rather than sacrifice and burnt offerings.

While this looks like a total repudiation of all cultic sacrifice, we have to remember that this psalm was recited precisely to accompany the offering of just such a sacrifice.

What the author must mean is that personal responsibility must accompany the ritual, and not that the physical must be abandoned in favour of the spiritual. This applies to our offering of the Eucharist as much as it did for those in Herod’s Temple in the time of Jesus.

The use of this psalm in the Letter to the Hebrews sanctions its Christological interpretation, and it is in this sense that it is used in the liturgy today.

It becomes a song of Christ the servant offering himself in his baptism to a life of total obedience to the Father's will, a life that will lead him to a ministry to the poor and the outcast, the sick and the suffering, culminating on Calvary. All this will be the subject of the gospel readings in the coming months.

**The Second Reading from the First letter of Paul to the Corinthians 1:1-3**

In Acts 18;12-17 we learn that Sosthenes was head of the Corinthian synagogue when Paul converted its members to Christianity. This must have happened in 51 A.D. because we know that Gallio was proconsul of the district for only 12 months in 51-52 A.D.

While in Ephesus between 54-57 A.D, Paul and Sosthenes were informed of rival parties and of scandals in the Church and the Corinthians, in a letter to Paul, had submitted a number of questions. In today's reading we have the opening verses of the letter, the address and greeting in a style which was normal for personal correspondence.

Notable features of the reply later on concern the Christian attitude to marriage and celibacy, the authentic doctrine of the Eucharist, and the first elements of his teaching on the Body of Christ. But, the most striking feature in to-day’s extract however, is Paul's emphasis on the universal nature of the Church. He reminds the Corinthians that they are the Church of God "which is at Corinth." They are in other words, the local embodiment of the universal Ecclesia. There can be only one people of God, and each congregation is nothing by itself but is the local unit of that one people. A Christian congregation is more than a voluntary group of like-minded people who assemble for religious activity.

Paul reminds us, through the Corinthians that we are not alone—we are called to be saints together with all those who in every place call on the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. In my view this strongly lends itself to the Catholic understanding of the nature of the Church. However, we are also faced with other Christian communities who differ from this view. This is a situation not catered for in the New Testament writings and I feel that the most we can say is that we are agreed in many fundamental truths while respecting each others differences.

**Gospel John 1:29-34**

During Year A we use Matthew's Gospel except for to-day because of the importance of Jesus' baptism to the Epiphany season. In the first chapter of John’s Gospel the Baptist’s unwitting function is to reveal to the reader who this Jesus is. He describes him as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. It is now the reader’s responsibility to use the distilled knowledge he has acquired through the decades of inspired revelation. It is John’s literary method to combine more than one idea in one word or phrase, thus deliberately causing ambiguity. Here one of these ideas is obtained from Isaiah 53;7-12, where a lamb quietly submits to death, (v.7), is buried in a rich man’s tomb, (v.9), and obtains his murderers forgiveness (v.11). (see footnotes)

But at the Crucifixion we also know that John deliberately scheduled Jesus’ death to the time that the lamb was killed for the Passover, and it so is certain that he was introducing the idea from the outset. In any event, Jesus is the one who will remove the sin that hampers mankind, by his death on the cross.

When the Baptist said (3rd line) that Jesus ranked before him because he preceded him, he sounds as if he is thinking of Jesus as the expected Elijah. But here, again, is another example of the author’s technique. John is forcing the Baptist to unwittingly allude to Christ’s pre-existence with the Father in the Creation before time began. (Genesis 1;1 & John 1;1-2)

John does not describe Jesus’s actual Baptism for fear of suggesting a subordinate nature to his cousin. Instead he has the Baptist outlining the implications that will only be completely understood when the Spirit descended on the Church at Pentecost three years later.

**Footnotes**

In Aramaic the noun talya means both 'servant and 'lamb.'

It is this passage which provided the title for Thomas Harris’ novel of 1981