

## 29th Sunday of the Year, Year C

Today's responsorial psalm is a prayer of trust. At the beginning of the psalm, the psalmist looks up beyond the protective mountains to God the Creator of heaven and earth, and he rejoices in the fact that it is God who comes to his help. He proclaims his trust in the fact that God will help him now, and for ever. Neither space nor time can limit the love with which God keeps watch over him.

God is likened to a guard keeping watch at his post on the city wall, guarding the city while its inhabitants sleep. We might also imagine a mother or father keeping a protective eye on a child. The word 'guard' ('keep watch over', 'protect') occurs six times in the eight verses of the psalm. The words 'The Lord is your guard' (which, incidentally, is the meaning of the name 'Samaria') is at the exact centre of the psalm. We might think of the beautiful words spoken to Jacob by God: 'Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you'(Genesis 28:15). Thanks to Jesus, we believe that God speaks the same words to each one of us: 'Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.'

The priestly blessing from the book of Numbers - a blessing that we sometimes use at the end of Mass - also includes a promise of God's protection: 'The Lord bless you and keep you (= 'guard you', 'keep watch over you'); the Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you; the Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace'(Numbers 6:24-26).

Knowing he was about to die and leave his disciples, Jesus' final prayer includes a prayer that his Father would keep watch over them: 'Holy Father, protect those whom you have given to me, so that they may be one, as we are one. While I was with them, I protected them in your name that you have given me. I guarded them, but now I am coming to you'(John 17:11-12).

We know that Jesus himself continues to love us and is constantly sending his Spirit to guard our minds and hearts in grace. He is constantly interceding for us with his Father. Whatever others may be doing to us, or whatever harm we may be doing to ourselves, we are in the hands of God who loves us and will never abandon us. We may, like Jesus, be experiencing a form of crucifixion, but, like Jesus we can retain a profound peace at the centre of our soul, and say to God our Father 'Into your hands I commend my spirit'. This is what it means to be a disciple of Jesus. Take that away from our lives and imagine the emptiness!

What about all those who have never heard of Jesus, or of the one he called 'Abba'. Let us pause and wonder to whom they cry for help. They may, indeed, cry to God, but do they know, as we know, that God is love? Do they know the God and Father of Jesus? Have they ever seen God embrace a leper the way we have seen it? Have they seen him welcome the repentant thief into paradise? Have they heard the parable of the prodigal son? Do they experience the peace that flows from the sacrament of reconciliation? Are their souls nourished as ours are with the intimate communion of the Eucharist. Do they experience what it means for drink in the very life of Jesus poured out from his pierced heart?

Do they belong to a community that can hold us up, as Aaron and Hur held up Moses in today's

First Reading, while we look to God for help? Do they know what it means to belong to the communion of saints, knowing as we fight our battles that all the saints and martyrs are surrounding us, including Mary the mother of Jesus who lays her protective mantle over us?

None of this will necessarily keep us clear of suffering. But it does sustain us, knowing, as Jesus knew on the cross, that we are not alone. God is gracing us all the time and protecting our soul with his love. The prophet Isaiah cried: 'How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces peace, who brings good news, who announces salvation, who says to Zion, Your God reigns!'(Is. 52:7)

Paul writes to the community in Rome: 'Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.' But how are they to call on one in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him? And how are they to proclaim him unless they are sent? As it is written, 'How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!'(Romans 10:13-15).

And so, in today's Second Reading, Paul insists that we proclaim the good news that we have heard, whether our words are welcomed or not. For God wants everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. He wants everyone to know his Son Jesus and to be drawn to him in the one, holy, Catholic and apostolic Church – the flock of which he is the shepherd. As Jesus said: 'I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. These also I must lead, and they will hear my voice, and there will be one flock and one shepherd'(John 10:16).

Jesus gave his life 'to gather into one all the scattered children of God'(John 11:52). His final words in today's Gospel are a question that must have been troubling his heart: 'When the Son of Man comes, will he find any faith on earth?' If it is genuine faith that brings us here to this Eucharist, we will be impelled to do what we can to tell others what we have been privileged to know. For some of us this will mean leaving our own land and taking the Gospel to places where it has not been heard. For most of us it will mean living our lives here in such a way that we will attract others to want to know what it is that inspires our life. For there are those in our own country and city and suburb who do not know of Jesus or who see themselves as having rejected his teaching – perhaps because the Christian message was presented to them so badly in the past, or perhaps because they do not have the courage to face the challenge which he presents. For all of us it means building a vibrant, prayerful, faith-filled and welcoming community – a spiritual home for those searching for a place where their souls can find peace.

Today's reading remind us that, whatever the difficulties of living our faith in this world, God is watching over us with love: 'God is your guard and your shade, standing at your right hand, guarding your soul'.