

SUNDAY READINGS

READ AT HOME

Twenty-First Sunday in Ordinary Time

Year B

22 August 2021



Collect

O God, who cause the minds of the faithful
to unite in a single purpose,
grant your people to love what you command
and to desire what you promise,
that, amid the uncertainties of this world,
our hearts may be fixed on that place
where true gladness is found.
Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son,
who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, for ever and ever.

Amen.

Readings and Commentaries

Ours is an age of limitless options. The mantra of our time is to keep options open. We don't like getting boxed in, we resist making choices that exclude future possibilities. We become very agile at keeping competing options in play. We're anxious about what we might miss out on, so we fight to stay free.

If this is the motif of our culture, then it seems to be at odds with the word of God for today. Joshua throws down the gauntlet of choice to the Israelites of old, Jesus puts his disciples on the spot with a piercing question, and Paul offers teaching on marriage that can get our teeth on edge. The question to wrestle with is, how we can be truly free? No-one was more obedient than Jesus, and no-one has ever been so free. Dare we believe that by taking the risk of whole-hearted bridge-burning commitment to the Lord we shall find the freedom for which we long?

A reading from the book of Joshua

24:1–2, 15–18

Joshua gathered all the tribes of Israel together at Shechem; then he called the elders, leaders, judges and scribes of Israel, and they presented themselves before God. Then Joshua said to all the people: 'If you will not serve the Lord, choose today whom you wish to serve, whether the gods that your ancestors served beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are now living. As for me and my House, we will serve the Lord.'

The people answered, 'We have no intention of deserting the Lord our God who brought us and our ancestors out of the land of Egypt, the house of slavery, who worked those great wonders before our eyes and preserved us all along the way we travelled and among all the peoples through whom we journeyed. We too will serve the Lord, for he is our God.'

First Reading

This passage comes from the last chapter of the book of Joshua. Having successfully led the conquest of Canaan and settled the twelve tribes in their various territories, Moses' successor Joshua completes his mission (and his life) by making a covenant at the shrine of Shechem.

The text as we have it is a combination of the opening verses of the chapter and a later section. What has been omitted is Joshua's recital of all of God's deeds on behalf of his people. The list extends from the call of Abraham through to the exodus and on to the Hebrews' arrival in the Promised Land. These verses provide the context for Joshua's challenge to the people; their omission means that his opening words seem abrupt and negative.

Joshua presents the Israelites with a choice – to swear allegiance to the Lord or to serve the gods of their ancestors or the Amorites. The people reply with their own short summary of the things God had done for them. This paves the way for their declaration of loyalty to the Lord.

After the short narrative with which the reading begins, the remainder of the passage is the dialogue between Joshua and the people. Given what has been left out, Joshua's first words – "If you will not serve the Lord" – ought not be over-dramatised. The emphasis should be on his call for a decision: "choose today whom you wish to serve". The reading comes to a climax in the final sentence when the people declare, "We too will serve the Lord, for he is our God". By proclaiming this text well, readers will help their listeners get ready to renew their loyalty to Jesus when the gospel is read.

Responsorial Psalm

Ps 33:2–3, 16–23

R. Taste and see the goodness of the Lord.

I will bless the Lord at all times,
his praise always on my lips;
in the Lord my soul shall make its boast.
The humble shall hear and be glad. R.

The Lord turns his face against the wicked
to destroy their remembrance from the earth.
The Lord turns his eyes to the just
and his ears to their appeal. R.

They call and the Lord hears
and rescues them in all their distress.
The Lord is close to the broken-hearted;
those whose spirit is crushed he will save. R.

Many are the trials of the just man
but from them all the Lord will rescue him.
He will keep guard over all his bones,
not one of his bones shall be broken. R.

Evil brings death to the wicked;
those who hate the good are doomed.
The Lord ransoms the souls of his servants.
Those who hide in him shall not be condemned. R.

Responsorial Psalm

Today's responsorial psalm is unusually long. Usually they consist of either three or four verses. This one has five. It will be a challenge for readers to sustain the congregation's prayerful participation through to the end.

Just as the first reading presented a rather one-sided contrast between Israel's God and other gods, so the later verses of the psalm revolve around a similar opposition. In this case it's between the humble, just and broken-hearted on the one hand, and the wicked on the other. Most of the text is devoted to affirming God's saving love for the loyal believer; the fate of the wicked is not dwelt on.

Nothing in the text itself presents any difficulty for the reader. The test lies in the exceptional number of verses. Good readers will engage the congregation throughout.

A reading from the letter of St Paul to the Ephesians

5:21–32

Give way to one another in obedience to Christ. Wives should regard their husbands as they regard the Lord, since as Christ is head of the Church and saves the whole body, so is a husband the head of his wife; and as the Church submits to Christ, so should wives submit to their husbands, in everything. Husbands should love their wives just as Christ loved the Church and sacrificed himself for her to make her holy. He made her clean by washing her in water with a form of words, so that when he took her to himself she would be glorious, with no speck or wrinkle or anything like that, but holy and faultless. In the same way, husbands must love their wives as they love their own bodies; for a man to love his wife is for him to love himself. A man never hates his own body, but he feeds it and looks after it; and that is the way Christ treats the Church, because it is his body - and we are its living parts. For this reason, a man must leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two will become one body. This mystery has many implications; but I am saying it applies to Christ and the Church.

A reading from the holy Gospel according to John

6:60–69

After hearing his doctrine many of the followers of Jesus said, 'This is intolerable language. How could anyone accept it?' Jesus was aware that his followers were complaining about it and said, 'Does this upset you? What if you should see the Son of Man ascend to where he was before?'

'It is the spirit that gives life,
the flesh has nothing to offer.
The words I have spoken to you are spirit
and they are life.'

'But there are some of you who do not believe.' For Jesus knew from the outset those who did not believe, and who it was that would betray him. He went on, 'This is why I told you that no one could come to me unless the Father allows him.' After this, many of his disciples left him and stopped going with him.

Then Jesus said to the Twelve, 'What about you, do you want to go away too?' Simon Peter answered, 'Lord, who shall we go to? You have the message of eternal life, and we believe; we know that you are the Holy One of God.'

Second Reading

Readers and presiders alike may be tempted to omit or replace today's extract from Ephesians. Its declaration that "a husband is the head of his wife" and its directive that "wives should submit to their husbands" may provoke resistance in many listeners' minds. This could prevent them from hearing the thoughtful teaching that the passage as a whole has to offer. Readers, of course, have no opportunity to explain what they proclaim or put it into context; that's the role of the homilist. But it certainly helps if they go to the trouble of studying the text carefully enough to get an informed understanding of the author's theological insights.

A further difficulty arises from the non-linear way the author goes about making his case. Often enough in letters written by or attributed to Paul, the argument proceeds by association. One word or phrase or idea prompts another and the flow of thought takes off in a different direction. Readers and congregations can choose to go along with the current of ideas and allow their imaginations to roam free. This may well lead them to discover fresh insights of their own.

Clearly the primary emphasis throughout this passage is on male initiative – the husband in regard to his wife, and Christ in regard to the Church – as one would expect in a patriarchal culture. But there are seeds of revolution here. Husbands are counselled to love their wives as Christ loved the Church, that is, by giving of themselves unconditionally in self-sacrificing love.

The reader's task is to proclaim the whole reading steadily and strongly, matching the author's emphases with appropriate volume and tone of voice.

Gospel

In John's unique account of the mission of Jesus, the feeding of the crowd and the robust debate that follows provoke a crisis for the would-be followers of Jesus. There is a parting of the ways. Many choose to leave Jesus. Peter, by contrast, is prompted to make a profession of faith. While John's telling of the story is different from the other evangelists, all four present Peter as the disciple who impulsively confesses his faith in Jesus. Here he declares Jesus to be "the Holy One of God".

Earlier in the passage Jesus refers to himself as "the Son of Man". This title, used before in this chapter and several times elsewhere in John, alludes to the heavenly human being of Daniel's vision (7:13-14) and implies that Jesus is the locus of an active inter-relationship between heaven and earth.

The central verse in which Jesus declares that "It is the spirit that gives life, the flesh has nothing to offer" seems to flatly contradict what he has just said about the necessity of eating "the flesh of the Son of Man". It makes sense if in today's text the word "flesh" has shifted meaning to refer to unredeemed humanity. It cannot be a denigration of our bodily being because "the Word became flesh". What matters for us disciples is to take Jesus' words to heart and let them infuse our flesh-and-blood existence with life.

This episode is dramatically written. If well proclaimed it has the capacity to confront the congregation with their need to make a choice. Will they too go away, or will they stand with Peter, declare their faith in Jesus, and commit themselves to following him?

Concluding Prayer

Solemn Blessing (Ordinary Time VI)

Bow down for the blessing.

May God bless us with every heavenly blessing,
make us always holy and pure in his sight,
pour out in abundance upon us the riches of his glory,
and teach us with the words of truth;
may he instruct us in the Gospel of salvation,
and ever endow us with fraternal charity.
Through Christ our Lord.
Amen.

And may the blessing of almighty God,
the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit,
come down on us and remain with us for ever.
Amen.

(Adapted from the Solemn Blessing for Ordinary Time VI, Roman Missal p. 717)