

SUNDAY READINGS

READ AT HOME

Twenty-Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Year B

12 September 2021



Collect

Look upon us, O God,
Creator and ruler of all things,
and, that we may feel the working of your mercy,
grant that we may serve you with all our heart.
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

Many of us would be hard put to explain how we've come by our opinions and attitudes. In fact much of the time we may not even be able to say what our opinions and attitudes are. Yet they make up an inner field of force that is always influencing the decisions we make. How vulnerable we are to adopting the views of those we like or the values of the advertising that assails us every day! Second-hand and unexamined points of view are part of the baggage we carry.

Today the gospel confronts us with a double dare. The first comes from Jesus' second question to his disciples: "Who do you (not other people) say that I am?" The second comes from his insistence that to follow him is to walk the way of the cross and that to find life we must first give ours away. Together these two challenges dare us to arrive at core convictions that will govern who we are and what we make of our lives. It's not enough to declare with Peter that Jesus is the Christ. We must let this faith, as James tells us, flower in good works. Dare we?

A reading from the book of Isaiah 50:5–9

The Lord has opened my ear.

For my part, I made no resistance,
neither did I turn away.
I offered my back to those who struck me,
my cheeks to those who tore at my beard;
I did not cover my face
against insult and spittle.

The Lord comes to my help,
so that I am untouched by the insults.
So, too, I set my face like flint;
I know I shall not be shamed.

My vindicator is here at hand.
Does anyone start proceedings against me?
Then let us go to court together.
Who thinks he has a case against me?
Let him approach me.
The Lord is coming to my help,
who dare condemn me?

Responsorial Psalm Ps 114:1–6, 8–9

R. I will walk in the presence of the Lord,
in the land of the living.

or

R. Alleluia.

I love the Lord for he has heard
the cry of my appeal;
for he turned his ear to me
in the day when I called him. R.

They surrounded me, the snares of death,
with anguish of the tomb;
they caught me, sorrow and distress.
I called on the Lord's name.
O Lord my God, deliver me! R.

How gracious is the Lord, and just;
our God has compassion.
The Lord protects the simple hearts;
I was helpless so he saved me! R.

He has kept my soul from death,
my eyes from tears
and my feet from stumbling.
I will walk in the presence of the Lord
in the land of the living. R.

First Reading

This reading from the prophet Isaiah overlaps with the one we hear on Palm or Passion Sunday. It's from the third of the four passages in Isaiah that are generally known as the "songs of the suffering servant". The original meaning of these texts is disputed, but the choice of this extract invites us to relate it to today's gospel in which Jesus speaks about his redemptive suffering.

The figure of the servant is mysterious; it could be a person or it could be Israel as a people. The songs suggest that this servant has been chosen by God for a mission that will entail opposition and suffering but will bring vindication.

Spoken in the first person, the reading depicts the experience of the servant. First of all the servant is a disciple, one who listens to the Lord. As a result he meets with violent opposition but does not retaliate with violence. He defiantly puts his trust in the Lord who will defend and vindicate him as in a court of law.

The text invites the reader to enter into the mind of the servant and to speak with his voice. The congregation needs to sense the servant's weakness and strength. Though defenceless, he is determined to remain steadfast in the face of hostile attacks. Readers should adopt a solemn, but not morbid, tone and proclaim the text at a measured pace. It concludes on a strongly assertive note.

Responsorial Psalm

Psalm 114/116 is in the form of testimony given by the psalmist. He announces to the assembled congregation that the Lord has rescued him from great distress, seemingly the imminent danger of death. The experience has been so remarkable that he wants to tell all and sundry about it. It has all been God's work, he declares, so there is every reason to proclaim the goodness of God.

Readers will note that the tone of the second verse differs from that of the other three. They are joyful and upbeat. The second, by contrast, is dark in mood. It conveys the desperate plight of the psalmist when all seems lost. Readers should adopt a more sombre but deeply felt tone for this.

Care will need to be taken because of the irregular number of lines in each verse – four, five, four, five. This means that the congregation should be given clear and simple cues as to when to come in with the response. A downward inflection of the voice and an upward glance should be enough. This may be especially needed for the last two lines of the fourth verse because the wording is exactly the same as the response, and the congregation may be tempted to join in prematurely.

A reading from the letter of St James 2:14–18

Take the case, my brothers, of someone who has never done a single good act but claims that he has faith. Will that faith save him? If one of the brothers or one of the sisters is in need of clothes and has not enough food to live on, and one of you says to them, 'I wish you well; keep yourself warm and eat plenty,' without giving them these bare necessities of life, then what good is that? Faith is like that: if good works do not go with it, it is quite dead.

This is the way to talk to people of that kind: 'You say you have faith and I have good deeds; I will prove to you that I have faith by showing you my good deeds - now you prove to me that you have faith without any good deeds to show.'

A reading from the holy Gospel according to Mark

8:27–35

Jesus and his disciples left for the villages round Caesarea Philippi. On the way he put this question to his disciples, 'Who do people say I am?' And they told him. 'John the Baptist,' they said, 'others Elijah; others again, one of the prophets.' 'But you,' he asked, 'who do you say I am?' Peter spoke up and said to him, 'You are the Christ.' And he gave them strict orders not to tell anyone about him.

And he began to teach them that the Son of Man was destined to suffer grievously, to be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes, and to be put to death, and after three days to rise again; and he said all this quite openly. Then, taking him aside, Peter started to remonstrate with him. But, turning and seeing his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said to him, 'Get behind me, Satan! Because the way you think is not God's way but man's.'

He called the people and his disciples to him and said, 'If anyone wants to be a follower of mine, let him renounce himself and take up his cross and follow me. For anyone who wants to save his life will lose it; but anyone who loses his life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.'

Second Reading

One of the great controversies of the Reformation was about faith and works. Luther's emphasis on the grace of salvation as he understood it from Paul's letters to the Romans and the Galatians led him to downplay this text from James. At this distance Christians of different traditions can readily agree that there is no fundamental contradiction between Paul and James. Having celebrated the five hundredth anniversary of the Reformation in 2017, we are blessed that agreement on core theological issues has been reached by Lutheran and Catholic theologians.

In today's text James is as forthright as ever. His portrayal of the person who claims to have faith while doing nothing to put it into practice may be close to a caricature, but his argument is compelling. And an argument it is. James is like a barrister making his case in court. He proceeds like an effective debater, setting up rhetorical questions in order to knock them down.

The reading is short but full of energy. It offers readers the opportunity to draw the congregation into the cut and thrust of the debate. All the more reason for them to take care with their preparation so they can be sure when James is speaking with his own voice and when he is assuming the voice of his imagined opponent. The heart of the reading lies in the categorical statement: "Faith is like that: if good works do not go with it, it is quite dead".

Gospel

Today's passage from Mark functions as the hinge connecting the two halves of the gospel narrative. Peter's profession of faith in the first part of the reading brings Jesus' ministry in Galilee to a climax, while Jesus' warning about his forthcoming passion and death in the second part turns our gaze towards Jerusalem.

The disconcerting juxtaposition of Peter's confession of faith and Jesus' stinging rebuke of his earthly thinking only goes to emphasise Mark's major concern. What disciples of every age have to come to grips with is Jesus' messianic identity as the Son of Man who suffers, is crucified and is raised. Those who profess their faith in him must traverse the same way of the cross.

It is unclear how much attention Mark wants his readers to pay to the location of this episode. Caesarea Philippi was in the far north of the country, beyond the region of Galilee, about as distant from Jerusalem as could be. Its very name bore witness to the link between the Roman emperor and his proxy, Herod's son Philip. By situating Jesus' interchange with Peter so far from Jerusalem and so close to a centre that embodied imperial dominance, Mark may have wanted to differentiate Jesus from this kind of earthly might and reiterate the point that he would be a crucified Messiah.

Although a familiar text, the reading presents a vivid story, told with dramatic flair. It lends itself to being proclaimed with verve.

Concluding Prayer

Solemn Blessing (Ordinary Time III)

Bow down for the blessing.

May almighty God bless us in his kindness
and pour out saving wisdom upon us.

Amen.

May he nourish us always with the teachings of the faith
and make us persevere in holy deeds.

Amen.

May he turn our steps towards himself
and show us the path of charity and peace.

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 III, Roman Missal p. 715)