

SUNDAY READINGS

READ AT HOME

Twenty-Third Sunday in Ordinary Time

Year B

5 September 2021



Collect

O God, by whom we are redeemed and receive adoption,
look graciously upon your beloved sons and daughters,
that those who believe in Christ
may receive true freedom
and an everlasting inheritance.
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

Those who have been baptised as infants – and that’s most of us – have no recollection of the ceremony. We have no personal memory of the gesture that originated in today’s gospel story. But if you have been at a baptism recently you will recall that immediately after the child’s immersion or washing there’s a series of short rituals. The infant is anointed with chrism, robed in a white garment, given a baptismal candle, and touched on the ears and the mouth. This last action is directly inspired by today’s gospel reading.

The words that accompany the gesture are worth revisiting: “The Lord Jesus made the deaf hear and the dumb speak. May he soon touch your ears to receive his word, and your mouth to proclaim his faith, to the praise and glory of God the Father”. This is our baptismal calling, to hear the word of God, take it to heart, and speak it forth in all we say and do. Is today an opportunity to reflect on how true we are to our baptismal vocation?

A reading from the prophet Isaiah**35:4–7**

Say to all faint hearts,
'Courage! Do not be afraid.

'Look, your God is coming,
vengeance is coming,
the retribution of God;
he is coming to save you.'

Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened,
the ears of the deaf unsealed,
then the lame shall leap like a deer
and the tongues of the dumb sing for joy;
for water gushes in the desert,
streams in the wasteland,
the scorched earth becomes a lake,
the parched land springs of water.

First Reading

The short extract from the 35th chapter of Isaiah that forms the first reading has clearly been chosen because part of it is cited in today's gospel. It would repay the reader's time to take up the Bible and read through the whole chapter.

To grasp the full impact of Isaiah's oracle of healing and renewal we need to imagine ourselves in exile. It is six hundred years before the birth of Jesus, and the Israelites are in Babylon, the centre of imperial power. The prophet is addressing a people who had lost everything that represented God's faithful love for them – the land, the temple, the king. In their dispossession and desolation, he seeks to rekindle their hope for return and restoration.

He assures them that God is coming to save them. There will be healing for the blind, the deaf, the lame and the dumb, and the desert will be transformed into a lake by springs and streams. The reading feels like part of a litany that names one wonder after another. The phrases are strong and short; they should be proclaimed at a measured pace so that each one is given the weight that is its due. Readers who take to heart the encouragement that Isaiah sought to give to the exiles of old will communicate its promise joyfully to their congregations.

Responsorial Psalm**Ps 145:7–10**

R. Praise the Lord, my soul!

or

R. Alleluia.

It is the Lord who keeps faith for ever,
who is just to those who are oppressed.
It is he who gives bread to the hungry,
the Lord, who sets prisoners free. R.

It is the Lord who gives sight to the blind,
who raises up those who are bowed down,
the Lord who loves the just,
the Lord, who protects the stranger. R.

The Lord upholds the widow and orphan,
but thwarts the path of the wicked.

The Lord will reign for ever,
Zion's God, from age to age. R.

Responsorial Psalm

Psalm 145/146 is a hymn of praise that is wholly affirmative. Apart from one verse that warns against putting trust in human help, the entire psalm is one of praise and blessing for the goodness of God.

The response for today comes from the opening verse. It's a short phrase with which the psalmist encourages himself to sing God's praises. The verses that follow form the second half of the psalm. Like the first reading they list one divine blessing after another. Being expressed in the third person, they serve as a public confession of faith in God. One can imagine those who hear it are prompted to shout "Amen", if not aloud then in their hearts.

At the same time we are reminded that to put our faith in this God is to commit ourselves to engage in the same works of mercy. Jesus made this point unforgettably in the parable of the sheep and the goats (Mt 25:31-46).

A reading from the letter of St James 2:1–5

My brothers, do not try to combine faith in Jesus Christ, our glorified Lord, with the making of distinctions between classes of people. Now suppose a man comes into your synagogue, beautifully dressed and with a gold ring on, and at the same time a poor man comes in, in shabby clothes, and you take notice of the well-dressed man, and say, 'Come this way to the best seats;' then you tell the poor man, 'Stand over there' or 'You can sit on the floor by my foot-rest.' Can't you see that you have used two different standards in your mind, and turned yourselves into judges, and corrupt judges at that?

Listen, my dear brothers: it was those who are poor according to the world that God chose, to be rich in faith and to be the heirs to the kingdom which he promised to those who love him.

A reading from the holy Gospel according to Mark

7:31–37

Returning from the district of Tyre, Jesus went by way of Sidon towards the Sea of Galilee, right through the Decapolis region. And they brought him a deaf man who had an impediment in his speech; and they asked him to lay his hand on him. He took him aside in private, away from the crowd, put his fingers into the man's ears and touched his tongue with spittle. Then looking up to heaven he sighed; and he said to him, 'Ephphatha,' that is, 'Be opened.' And his ears were opened, and the ligament of his tongue was loosened and he spoke clearly. And Jesus ordered them to tell no one about it, but the more he insisted, the more widely they published it. Their admiration was unbounded. 'He has done all things well,' they said 'he makes the deaf hear and the dumb speak.'

Second Reading

Today's passage from the letter of James is characteristically blunt. His exposure of the way in which we make distinctions between people leaves us with no defence. The example he gives may be overdrawn but it makes the point perfectly well. Few of us can claim to treat all people with the same degree of respect on a consistent basis. All sorts of factors, conscious and unconscious, immediately come into play as soon as we begin to decide how to respond to another person.

There's irony in the teaching with which this reading finishes. Here and in countless other places in the scriptures God is depicted as one who does make distinctions. Time and again God is acclaimed as having a preference for the poor. Jesus himself declared the poor blessed at the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount. This means that if we are to be true disciples of his we should not approach others with a cool neutrality but instead give pride of place to those whom the world ignores.

After the opening admonition, the body of the reading paints a vivid picture of the kind of discrimination that is to be avoided. This should be read with enough flair for the congregation to be able to imagine the scene readily in their minds. This section ends with a question that delivers judgement. It would be helpful for readers to pause a moment here before going on to give strong emphasis to the concluding good news: God's choice of the poor "to be rich in faith and to be heirs to the kingdom".

Gospel

The lectionary omits Mark's version of Jesus' lively encounter with the Syrophenician woman. In Year A we hear Matthew's account of the episode around this time. Today we move on to the story of a cure that only Mark describes in detail. He begins by ascribing an itinerary to Jesus that is peculiarly roundabout. It may be that by having Jesus travel through so much Gentile territory Mark is foreshadowing the later mission of the Church.

There are two indications of Jesus' wish to avoid being characterised as no more than an itinerant healer. He takes the afflicted man aside to cure him in private, and then forbids everyone to say anything about it (to no avail). Mark's constant intent is on getting his readers to see Jesus as the Crucified Messiah, not as a wonder-worker.

Jesus' actions – putting his fingers in the man's ears and touching his tongue with spittle – are firmly in the Catholic sacramental tradition. It is no wonder that this gesture of Jesus along with the word that accompanies it has found its way into the rite of baptism.

The crowd's admiring acclamation of Jesus draws on the glorious vision of renewal in Isaiah 35 that served as the first reading. The message is clear: all that the prophet promised to the exiled Israelites has come to fulfilment in Jesus.

Concluding Prayer

Solemn Blessing (Ordinary Time II)

Bow down for the blessing.

May the peace of God,
which surpasses all understanding,
keep our hearts and minds
in the knowledge and love of God,
and of his Son, our Lord Jesus Christ.

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 II, Roman Missal p. 715)