

SUNDAY READINGS

READ AT HOME

Twenty-Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Year B

26 September 2021



Collect

O God, who manifest your almighty power
above all by pardoning and showing mercy,
bestow, we pray, your grace abundantly upon us
and make those hastening to attain your promises
heirs to the treasures of heaven.
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

As we approach the diamond jubilee of the Second Vatican Council's *Constitution on the Church*, the full realisation of its vision still lies ahead. One of the document's affirmations dovetails with today's word of God: "It is not only through the sacraments and the ministries of the Church that the Holy Spirit sanctifies and leads the people of God and enriches it with virtues, but 'allotting his gifts to everyone according as He wills' (1 Cor 12:11). He distributes special graces among the faithful of every rank. . . These charisms . . . are to be received with thanksgiving and consolation . . ." (#12).

Moses and Jesus both rejoice in the gifts of the Spirit given to others. They are thankful for them, not threatened by them. We are reminded today that the Spirit roams free, beyond the boundaries that human beings or institutions set up. Let us give thanks for the Spirit-filled men and women of our time, both in the Church and in other lively movements, and pray again, "Lord, send out your Spirit and renew the face of the earth".

A reading from the book of Numbers 11:25–29

The Lord came down in the Cloud. He spoke with Moses, but took some of the spirit that was on him and put it on the seventy elders. When the spirit came on them they prophesied, but not again.

Two men had stayed back in the camp; one was called Eldad and the other Medad. The spirit came down on them; though they had not gone to the Tent, their names were enrolled among the rest. These began to prophesy in the camp. The young man ran to tell this to Moses, 'Look,' he said 'Eldad and Medad are prophesying in the camp.' Then said Joshua the son of Nun, who had served Moses from his youth, 'My Lord Moses, stop them!' Moses answered him, 'Are you jealous on my account? If only the whole people of the Lord were prophets, and the Lord gave his Spirit to them all!'

Responsorial Psalm Ps 18:8, 10, 12–14

R. The precepts of the Lord give joy to the heart.

The law of the Lord is perfect,
it revives the soul.

The rule of the Lord is to be trusted,
it gives wisdom to the simple. R.

The fear of the Lord is holy,
abiding for ever.

The decrees of the Lord are truth
and all of them just. R.

So in them your servant finds instruction;
great reward is in their keeping.
But who can detect all his errors?
From hidden faults acquit me. R.

From presumption restrain your servant
and let it not rule me.
Then shall I be blameless,
clean from grave sin. R.

First Reading

This passage is the concluding part of an episode described at some length in Numbers 11:1–30. Readers would do well to prepare by reading the whole story.

Overwhelmed by the people's complaints about all their misfortunes, Moses makes his own complaint to the Lord. He accuses God of having laid too great a burden of leadership on him. In response God promises to share with seventy elders the spirit of prophecy that had been given to Moses. No explanation is offered as to how the two others who had remained behind came to prophesy, but Moses welcomes the gift they received.

The connections with the gospel are clear enough. Just as Joshua wants Moses to stop Eldad and Medad from prophesying, so John wants Jesus to forbid exorcists from acting in his name. And just as Moses declares his wish that everyone be a prophet, so Jesus declares: "Anyone who is not against us is for us". Both Moses and Jesus are affirming the freedom of the Spirit to move beyond artificial boundaries.

It may be difficult for congregations to relate to this reading, especially at the start, because they are unlikely to know the context. Readers need to take this into consideration and proclaim the reading with enough energy to catch the congregation's attention. Once this is achieved, the rest should follow. The episode is recounted in simple enough language and with a strong narrative flow.

Responsorial Psalm

The connection between the first reading and the responsorial psalm is not as direct today as it usually is. The second half of Psalm 18/19 offers praise for the gift of the Law – it is perfect, trustworthy and truthful, and it brings wisdom, instruction and a clear conscience. At a first glance such high praise of the Law might seem to be at odds with what Moses has just said about the freedom of the Spirit.

In fact there is a double connection between reading and psalm. The first is the more obvious: it's the person of Moses himself. He is both prophet and law-giver. God reveals the Law to Moses so that he can communicate it to the people. The second is less evident because of all the negative connotations that the word "law" has acquired. Originally the Torah was understood to be a precious gift. As a compilation of God's "words" to Israel, the Law defined Israel's identity as the Chosen People, blessed with God's faithful covenant love. It was cause for thanks and praise.

Readers will note how short the verse lines are and must take care not to rush them. The psalms are poetry, not prose.

A reading from the letter of St James 5:1–6

An answer for the rich. Start crying, weep for the miseries that are coming to you. Your wealth is all rotting, your clothes are all eaten up by moths. All your gold and your silver are corroding away, and the same corrosion will be your own sentence, and eat into your body. It was a burning fire that you stored up as your treasure for the last days. Labourers mowed your fields, and you cheated them - listen to the wages that you kept back, calling out; realise that the cries of the reapers have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts. On earth you have had a life of comfort and luxury; in the time of slaughter you went on eating to your heart's content. It was you who condemned the innocent and killed them; they offered you no resistance.

A reading from the holy Gospel according to Mark 9:38–43, 45, 47–48

John said to Jesus, 'Master, we saw a man who is not one of us casting out devils in your name; and because he was not one of us we tried to stop him.' But Jesus said, 'You must not stop him: no one who works a miracle in my name is likely to speak evil of me. Anyone who is not against us is for us.'

'If anyone gives you a cup of water to drink just because you belong to Christ, then I tell you solemnly, he will most certainly not lose his reward.'

'But anyone who is an obstacle to bring down one of these little ones who have faith, would be better thrown into the sea with a great millstone round his neck. And if your hand should cause you to sin, cut it off; it is better for you to enter into life crippled, than to have two hands and go to hell, into the fire that cannot be put out. And if your foot should cause you to sin, cut it off; it is better for you to enter into life lame, than to have two feet and be thrown into hell. And if your eye should cause you to sin, tear it out; it is better for you to enter into the kingdom of God with one eye, than to have two eyes and be thrown into hell where their worm does not die nor their fire go out.'

Second Reading

This final extract from the letter of James is the most uncompromising of all. It could well be a direct quote from one of Israel's prophets. It takes up their scathing critique of inequality, injustice and exploitation. James is unsparing in his condemnation of those who enrich themselves at the expense of the poor. While it makes no reference at all to Jesus and his teaching, it is not inconsistent with the woes that he pronounces in Luke's gospel (6:24-25).

There is no doubt that the text is confrontational, and we all have very effective defences against such challenging accusations. Readers should not attempt to soften the harshness of the diatribe, but neither should they deliver it melodramatically. What is called for is a clear, strong and unambiguous proclamation. Those who are willing to hear it will recognise its enduring truth. The ruthless exploitation of developing nations and their resources by global corporations, and the manipulation of weak taxation systems, is all too well documented. What we may be less willing to admit is our complicity in the same system closer to home.

This is a passionate text from start to finish. There is no relief at any point. Readers will need to sustain the sense of prophetic outrage right through to the end.

Gospel

Word association plays a big part in the composition of today's gospel text. Last Sunday's reading ended with Jesus' saying about welcoming children "in my name". This leads to the start of today's passage where Mark reports an exchange between Jesus and John on the issue of demons being cast out "in my name". Another saying – about the disciples being given water to drink – has become attached to this because they "bear the name of Christ" (NRSV).

In the third part of the reading recurring phrases such as "causes you to sin" (NRSV "stumble") and "thrown into hell" bind the unit together. Opinions are divided as to how these sayings are to be interpreted. The references to body parts could be meant literally. It's also possible that the body and its parts are intended as a metaphor for the Christian community and its members. A third interpretation is that these terms are euphemisms for sexual organs and forbidden behaviour such as sexual abuse, masturbation or adultery. Either way, it will certainly be difficult for congregations to hear about putting "a stumbling block before one of these little ones" without being reminded of the scandal of child sexual abuse.

Clearly the first two sections of this reading are positive and appealing in tone. The third and longest section is confronting. The irony is that the more strongly the passage is proclaimed and the greater the impact it has, the greater the challenge for the homilist to explain how it is all good news.

Concluding Prayer

Solemn Blessing (Ordinary Time V)

Bow down for the blessing.

May almighty God always keep every adversity far from us
and in his kindness pour out upon us the gifts of his blessing.

Amen.

May God keep our hearts attentive to his words,
that they may be filled with everlasting gladness.

Amen.

And so, may we always understand what is good and right,
and be found ever hastening along
in the path of God's commands,
made coheirs with the citizens of heaven.

Amen.

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 V, Roman Missal p. 716)