

SUNDAY READINGS

READ AT HOME

Thirty-Second Sunday in Ordinary Time

Year B

7 November 2021



Collect

Almighty and merciful God,
graciously keep from us all adversity,
so that, unhindered in mind and body alike,
we may pursue in freedom of heart
the things that are yours.
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

Within a decade after the end of the Second Vatican Council an astonishing array of liturgical rites had been revised and adopted. Among them was the marriage rite. There may be room for regret that the new ceremony did not keep the exhortation that used to be read. Here's a tiny excerpt that speaks about self-sacrificing love in marriage, concluding with a quote in archaic language. It's worth wondering how its wisdom relates to the daring generosity of the two widows we encounter in today's readings, along with Jesus himself.

"Henceforth you will belong entirely to each other; you will be one in mind, one in heart, and one in affections. And whatever sacrifices you may hereafter be required to make to preserve this common life, always make them generously. Sacrifice is usually difficult and irksome. Only love can make it easy; and perfect love can make it a joy. . . God so loved the World that He gave His only begotten Son; and the Son so loved us that He gave Himself for our salvation. 'Greater love than this no man hath, that a man lay down his life for his friends'".

A reading from the first book of Kings 17:10–16

Elijah the Prophet went off to Sidon. And when he reached the city gate, there was a widow gathering sticks; addressing her he said, 'Please bring a little water in a vessel for me to drink.' She was setting off to bring it when he called after her. 'Please' he said 'bring me a scrap of bread in your hand.' 'As the Lord your God lives,' she replied 'I have no baked bread, but only a handful of meal in a jar and a little oil in a jug; I am just gathering a stick or two to go and prepare this for myself and my son to eat, and then we shall die.' But Elijah said to her, 'Do not be afraid, go and do as you have said; but first make a little scone of it for me and bring it to me, and then make some for yourself and for your son. For thus the Lord speaks, the God of Israel:

"Jar of meal shall not be spent,
jug of oil shall not be emptied,
before the day when the Lord sends
rain on the face of the earth."

The woman went and did as Elijah told her and they ate the food, she, himself and her son. The jar of meal was not spent nor the jug of oil emptied, just as the Lord had foretold through Elijah.

First Reading

The stories of the prophet Elijah and his successor Elisha in 1 and 2 Kings are colourful and engaging, and this one is no exception. It's puzzling, however, that the first two verses of the episode have been omitted from the lectionary. They may not be essential but they do help set the scene. They reveal that Elijah goes to the Sidonian town of Zarephath and seeks out the widow because the Lord has commanded him to.

This is territory where the worship of Baal holds sway. It gives Elijah another opportunity to demonstrate the supremacy of Israel's God. The outcome of the story is heartwarming, but first we must feel the pathos of the widow's plight. She has only the barest of rations, not enough to keep her and her son alive, and this itinerant foreigner demands bread and water. In the event, she is impressed enough by Elijah's promise to take the risk of obeying him. Having put her faith in the prophet's word, she is blessed with an endless supply of flour and oil. As we shall see, the widow of today's gospel story also gives her all without there being any mention of a reward.

Readers of this passage are fortunate to have such an appealing story to proclaim. There are four voices for the reader to adopt: those of the narrator, the widow, Elijah, and the Lord. It is a divine-human drama that should readily catch and hold the congregation's attention.

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.

It is 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 lines of the psalm. 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. They serve as a concise litany of divine blessings. Being expressed in the third person, they constitute a public confession of faith in God. This is the faith exemplified by the widows of the first reading and the gospel. They put their trust in the claim that "the Lord upholds the widow and the orphan".

One can imagine those who hear this psalm are prompted to shout "Amen", if not aloud then in their hearts.

A reading from the letter to the Hebrews 9:24–28

It is not as though Christ had entered a man-made sanctuary which was only modelled on the real one; but it was heaven itself, so that he could appear in the actual presence of God on our behalf. And he does not have to offer himself again and again, like the high priest going into the sanctuary year after year with the blood that is not his own, or else he would have had to suffer over and over again since the world began. Instead of that, he has made his appearance once and for all, now at the end of the last age, to do away with sin by sacrificing himself. Since men only die once, and after that comes judgement, so Christ, too, offers himself only once to take the faults of many on himself, and when he appears a second time, it will not be to deal with sin but to reward with salvation those who are waiting for him.

A reading from the holy Gospel according to Mark

12:38–44

[In his teaching Jesus said, 'Beware of the scribes who like to walk about in long robes, to be greeted obsequiously in the market squares, to take the front seats in the synagogues and the places of honour at banquets; these are the men who swallow the property of widows, while making a show of lengthy prayers. The more severe will be the sentence they receive.']

He sat down opposite the treasury and watched the people putting money into the treasury, and many of the rich put in a great deal. A poor widow came and put in two small coins, the equivalent of a penny. Then he called his disciples and said to them, 'I tell you solemnly, this poor widow has put more in than all who have contributed to the treasury; for they have all put in money they had over, but she from the little she had has put in everything she possessed, all she had to live on.'

[Short Form: omit text in brackets.]

Second Reading

This extract from Hebrews shares the background of the letter as a whole. To fully grasp its meaning one needs to be familiar with both Old Testament ritual (especially the liturgy of the Day of Atonement) and Platonic philosophy. It's not likely that either readers or congregations will be equipped with specialised knowledge to fully interpret the text, but fortunately its main points are clear enough.

Unlike the Jewish high priest who has to enter the earthly sanctuary once every year to offer blood in atonement for sin, Jesus has entered heaven once and for all, having offered himself in sacrifice to do away with sin forever. Readers will need to study this text carefully to identify its fundamental assertions and to distinguish them from what is additional and explanatory. It may help to actually write out a simplified version of the argument. The sense-line layout of the NRSV text may also help.

Two points are worth noting. The phrase "to take the faults of many on himself" echoes the language of the fourth song of the suffering servant in Isaiah (53:12). Secondly, the final words of the reading – "to reward with salvation those who are waiting for him" – suggest that even though the letter to the Hebrews is a late work the expectation of Christ's return is still strong.

Gospel

This is the second of the three excerpts from Mark's account of Jesus' ministry in Jerusalem immediately prior to his passion and death. It falls into two distinct but related parts. The lectionary offers the option of a shorter version that omits the first part, but even the full passage is still relatively short. It would be a pity to opt for the truncated text.

On his way to Jerusalem Jesus had responded to the ambitions of his disciples by declaring that he had come not "to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many". Now that he is in the holy city preparing for his fate he reiterates his position. He voices sharp criticism of religious leaders, in this case the scribes, who shore up their status at the expense of the poor. Then he highlights the astonishing generosity of the poor widow.

Jesus' observation that the widow "has put in everything she possessed, all she had to live on" can be interpreted in two different ways. He could be praising her extraordinary trust in and devotion to God, anticipating the imminent unconditional surrender of his own life into God's hands. Or he could be intensifying his criticism of the scribes for persuading such a vulnerable woman to give away the last coins she had to survive on.

Both parts of the reading are vividly sketched miniatures that invite lively proclamation.

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)