

SUNDAY READINGS

READ AT HOME

Third Sunday in Ordinary Time

Year C

23 January 2022



Collect

Almighty ever-living God,
direct our actions according to your good pleasure,
that in the name of your beloved Son
we may abound in good works.
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

After the surprise choice of a gospel from John last Sunday, every gospel reading for the Sundays of Ordinary Time will now come from Luke. Today we are re-introduced to one of the key players (if that's the right term) in the Lucan narrative. The Holy Spirit was a prominent agent in the infancy stories, appears now as the driving force of Jesus' mission, and is always intimately involved when Luke deals with prayer.

In his agenda-setting exhortation, *The Joy of the Gospel*, Pope Francis wrote of the need to invoke the Spirit constantly, even if it means "being plunged into the deep and not knowing what we will find." He went on: "Yet there is no greater freedom than that of allowing oneself to be guided by the Holy Spirit, renouncing the attempt to plan and control everything to the last detail, and instead letting him enlighten, guide and direct us, leading us wherever he wills" (#280). Luke's Jesus did exactly that.

A reading from the book of Nehemiah

8:2–6, 8–10

Ezra the priest brought the Law before the assembly, consisting of men, women, and children old enough to understand. This was the first day of the seventh month. On the square before the Water Gate, in the presence of the men and women, and children old enough to understand, he read from the book from early morning till noon; all the people listened attentively to the Book of the Law.

Ezra the scribe stood on a wooden dais erected for the purpose. In full view of all the people – since he stood higher than all the people – Ezra opened the book; and when he opened it all the people stood up. Then Ezra blessed the Lord, the great God, and all the people raised their hands and answered, ‘Amen! Amen!’; then they bowed down and, face to the ground, prostrated themselves before the Lord. And Ezra read from the Law of God, translating and giving the sense, so that the people understood what was read.

Then Nehemiah – His Excellency – and Ezra, priest and scribe (and the Levites who were instructing the people) said to all the people, ‘This day is sacred to the Lord your God. Do not be mournful, do not weep.’ For the people were all in tears as they listened to the words of the Law.

He then said, ‘Go, eat the fat, drink the sweet wine, and send a portion to the man who has nothing prepared ready. For this day is sacred to our Lord. Do not be sad: the joy of the Lord is your stronghold.’

Responsorial Psalm

Ps 18:8–10, 15

R. Your words, Lord, are spirit and life.

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 precepts of the Lord are right,
they gladden the heart.

The command of the Lord is clear,
it gives light to the eyes. **R.**

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

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

May the spoken words of my mouth,
the thoughts of my heart,
win favour in your sight,

○ Lord, my rescuer, my rock! **R.**

First Reading

The choice of Nehemiah for the first reading may seem at odds with the texts from Paul and Luke in which the Spirit plays such a central role. By contrast, the key focus in Nehemiah is the Law. The word “law” may prompt negative associations from later polemics that pitted law against spirit. But here the Law is God’s gift, God’s word. It simultaneously reveals God’s covenant love and confirms Israel as God’s people.

In the historical context assumed by the book of Nehemiah – the return of the exiles from Babylon to Jerusalem – both of these need reaffirming. Those who have come back are struggling to rebuild the city and the temple and to recover their heritage as the chosen people. To hear the Law read out in solemn assembly and have their identity re-established was cause for celebration.

The event has elements of a liturgy of the word – the gathering, the dais, the proclamation, the instruction, the people’s response and the sending forth. But it’s couched in story form, as a drama in three acts. First the scene is set, then the central action of the reading and response occurs, before the episode concludes with a declaration and dismissal. The clear parallels with the story of Jesus in the synagogue at Nazareth explain the choice of this reading for today.

Once they have assured themselves of the pronunciation of Nehemiah’s name, readers should relish the opportunity to put their story-telling skills to good use. They should engage the congregation in the build-up of the drama until they too are moved by the joy of this ancient holy day.

Responsorial Psalm

Psalm 18/19 is something of a hybrid. It begins by extolling God’s glory revealed in creation, moves to praise of God’s wisdom embodied in the Law, and finishes with a plea for forgiveness and acceptance. The central section on the Law provides the first three verses of the responsorial psalm; the fourth verse is the conclusion of the psalm.

In complete harmony with the reading from Nehemiah, the psalm celebrates the Law as a treasure of wisdom entrusted by God to Israel. It bestows life, gladness, light, truth and justice. The Law binds God and people together in an eternal covenant. It’s no wonder that the psalmist concludes with a prayer that his words and thoughts be in full accord with the gift of the Law.

By way of exception, the response comes not from the psalm or even the Old Testament, but from the gospel. It’s adapted from what Jesus says to the disciples towards the end of his discourse on the bread of life (John 6:63). The wording of the psalm is succinct and the lines are short, so readers will need to lead the psalm thoughtfully, giving the congregation time to hear and absorb each phrase.

A reading from the first letter of St Paul to the Corinthians

12:12–30

Just as a human body, though it is made up of many parts, is a single unit because all these parts, though many, make one body, so it is with Christ. In the one Spirit we were all baptised, Jews as well as Greeks, slaves as well as citizens, and one Spirit was given to us all to drink. Nor is the body to be identified with any one of its many parts.

[If the foot were to say, 'I am not a hand and so I do not belong to the body', would that mean that it stopped being part of the body? If the ear were to say, 'I am not an eye, and so I do not belong to the body,' would that mean that it was not a part of the body? If your whole body was just one eye, how would you hear anything? If it was just one ear, how would you smell anything?

Instead of that, God put all the separate parts into the body on purpose. If all the parts were the same, how could it be a body? As it is, the parts are many but the body is one. The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I do not need you,' nor can the head say to the feet, 'I do not need you.'

What is more, it is precisely the parts of the body that seem to be the weakest which are the indispensable ones; and it is the least honourable parts of the body that we clothe with the greatest care. So our more improper parts get decorated in a way that our more proper parts do not need. God has arranged the body so that more dignity is given to the parts which are without it, and so that there may not be disagreements inside the body, but that each part may be equally concerned for all the others. If one part is hurt, all parts are hurt with it. If one part is given special honour, all parts enjoy it.]

Now you together are Christ's body; but each of you is a different part of it. [In the Church, God has given the first place to apostles, the second to prophets, the third to teachers; after them, miracles, and after them the gift of healing; helpers, good leaders, those with many languages. Are all of them apostles, or all of them prophets, or all of them teachers? Do they all have the gift of miracles, or all have the gift of healing? Do all speak strange languages, and all interpret them?]

[Short Form: omit text in brackets.]

A reading from the holy Gospel according to Luke

1:1–4; 4:14–21

Seeing that many others have undertaken to draw up accounts of the events that have taken place among us, exactly as these were handed down to us by those who from the outset were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word, I in my turn, after carefully going over the whole story from the beginning, have decided to write an ordered account for you, Theophilus, so that your Excellency may learn how well founded the teaching is that you have received. Jesus, with the power of the Spirit in him, returned to Galilee; and his reputation spread throughout the countryside. He taught in their synagogues and everyone praised him. He came to Nazara, where he had been brought up, and went into the synagogue on the sabbath day as he usually did. He stood up to read, and they handed him the scroll of the prophet Isaiah. Unrolling the scroll he found the place where it is written: The spirit of the Lord has been given to me, for he has anointed me. He has sent me to bring the good news to the poor, to proclaim liberty to captives and to the blind new sight, to set the downtrodden free, to proclaim the Lord's year of favour.

He then rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the assistant and sat down. And all eyes in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to speak to them, 'This text is being fulfilled today even as you listen.'

Second Reading

The second reading follows directly on from last Sunday's passage about the gifts of the Spirit. The Lectionary offers it in two forms, one full, the other abbreviated. Choosing between them isn't easy. The full version is quite long but has been severely cropped for the shorter one. The length of today's other readings is likely to swing the balance in favour of the latter.

This briefer text introduces Paul's analogy between the body and the community. Just as a physical body is "a single unit" made up of many parts, so "Christ's body" is both one and diverse. It's one in Spirit, but diverse in membership and gifts. It's a pity that the compilers of the Lectionary didn't see fit to leave in the verse that lists these gifts.

The longer text contains Paul's full exposé of the body analogy as well as the array of the Spirit's gifts. Given the play of ambitions and rivalries in the community, Paul explores the analogy at length to uphold the inherent value of all the gifts, no matter how seemingly insignificant.

Readers of the longer text should not hasten their way through Paul's elaborate development of the metaphor of the body, but read it patiently and sympathetically. Nonetheless the two paragraphs framing this explanation are of greater theological import and should be emphasised as such, though the questions in the final verses bring the reading to a somewhat indeterminate end. The brevity of the shorter text means that readers will need to engage everyone's attention before proceeding deliberately through its far-reaching content.

Gospel

Even more so than the psalm, the gospel for today is a hybrid. It yokes together the prologue of Luke's gospel (1:1-4) and the launch of Jesus' prophetic mission (4:14-21). The three chapters in between these two extracts have been mined for the gospels of Advent and Christmas.

Both Luke and John begin their gospel with a prologue, but they could hardly be more different. John's is a poetic and profoundly theological hymn of cosmic scope. Luke's is a brief but elaborate apologia for the historical authenticity of his gospel. He's staking out a claim for the gospel story and the faith of the Christian community to be respected in Greco-Roman society. He does so in the space of a single sentence but one that is long and literary. The reader will need to employ modulation, pace and breath control to do justice to this formal opening. The NRSV maintains the unity of the sentence but sets it out helpfully in shorter lines.

A significant pause is needed to mark the transition to the second part of the reading on the inauguration of Jesus' public ministry. It's a dramatic story that grows in intensity until the final climactic declaration of Jesus. Luke is letting his readers know at the outset just what kind of mission Jesus is embarking on. We have to wait until next Sunday to hear how the reception Jesus gets foreshadows his fate. This vital episode calls for energetic delivery, with particular and deliberate emphasis given to each element of the Isaian text.

Concluding 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)