

SUNDAY READINGS

READ AT HOME

Eighth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Year C

27 February 2022



Collect

Grant us, O Lord, we pray,
that the course of our world
may be directed by your peaceful rule
and that your Church may rejoice,
untroubled in her devotion.
Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son,
who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
God, for ever and ever.

Amen.

Readings and Commentaries

How much of Shakespeare's creative output is a commentary on this single saying of the prophet Jeremiah: "The heart is more devious than any other thing, perverse too; who can pierce its secrets?" (17:9). Perhaps all great literature is an exploration of the human heart – its ways, its secrets, its nobility, its treachery.

How to read the heart? The ancient sage Ben Sirach suggests it's words that reveal a person's inner truth. Anyone who has been deceived by a smooth talker might beg to differ. The psalmist and the gospel suggest a different criterion: the fruits of a person's life. Actions, not words. Yet even good deeds can be misleading when the motives behind them aren't fully transparent.

There's no simple answer. All day every day we are observing, sifting and judging the available clues to others' characters. We're even doing it internally to ourselves. What a gift it is to believe in the fundamental goodness of the human heart, our own as well as that of others! It's the fruit of faith in the everlasting goodness of God. It's a grace to pray for daily.

A reading from the book of Ecclesiasticus
27:4–7

In a shaken sieve the rubbish is left behind,
so too the defects of a man appear in his talk.
The kiln tests the work of the potter,
the test of a man is in his conversation.
The orchard where the tree grows is judged
on the quality of its fruit,
similarly a man's words betray what he feels.
Do not praise a man before he has spoken,
since this is the test of men.

First Reading

It may be one of the longest books in the Bible (after the Psalms and the prophet Isaiah), but much of Ecclesiasticus is a compilation of quite short sayings or proverbs. These put it in the category of traditional Jewish wisdom, though the book itself is not included in either Jewish or Protestant Bibles. Nowadays the book is often named Sirach after its self-identified author Ben Sirach.

Wisdom writings are concerned with questions of everyday living – how to live well, justly, humanely and happily. These were common concerns in the cultures of the ancient Near East. Jewish teachers readily borrowed from their reservoir of insights. With its extensive collection of practical maxims Ecclesiasticus can be characterised as a teacher's manual for right living.

The question addressed in today's brief text is how to judge a person's character. The answer is simple – by their words. Three homely examples illustrate the point. A sieve separates rubbish from substance; a kiln puts pottery to the test; and fruit trees are judged by the quality of their produce. The lesson is summed up in the concluding moral: judge no-one until you have heard them speak. It's the third of the examples that is taken up in the gospel.

Readers will need to proclaim this short passage slowly and deliberately. It will take congregations time to tune in to its particular style and to appreciate the wisdom condensed in each of the four units. As usual the NRSV renders this text (and the gospel) in inclusive language.

Responsorial Psalm **Ps 91:2–3,13–16**

R. Lord, it is good to give thanks to you.

It is good to give thanks to the Lord
to make music to your name, O Most High,
to proclaim your love in the morning
and your truth in the watches of the night. **R.**

The just will flourish like the palm-tree
and grow like a Lebanon cedar. **R.**

Planted in the house of the Lord
they will flourish in the courts of our God,
still bearing fruit when they are old,
still full of sap, still green,
to proclaim that the Lord is just.
In him, my rock, there is no wrong. **R.**

Responsorial Psalm

Psalm 91/92 is a hymn of thanksgiving in praise of God's faithfulness. The opening and closing verses have been selected and combined to form the responsorial psalm. Flourishing trees are the metaphorical thread joining the first reading, psalm and gospel, but the key link is "the just." Somewhat strangely the psalm's reference to the folly of the senseless sinner has been passed over, even though this would have reinforced, by contrast, the theme of wisdom.

The first verse, from which the response has been adapted, is a general invitation to sing of God's goodness day and night. The short second verse presents the dual image of palm-tree and Lebanon cedar (the latter proverbial in its own right). The long final verse builds on the notion of the temple ("the house of the Lord") as the place where life thrives. It brings Ezekiel's vision of life-giving waters flowing from the temple to mind (47:1-12). A complementary image, that of God's justice as a "rock," brings the psalm to a close.

Readers will need to attend carefully to the differing lengths of the verses, using vocal and visual cues to prompt a timely response to the short second verse and to delay the response to the third until it has been fully proclaimed.

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

15:54– 58

When this perishable nature has put on imperishability, and when this mortal nature has put on immortality, then the words of scripture will come true: Death is swallowed up in victory. Death, where is your victory? Death, where is your sting? Now the sting of death is sin, and sin gets its power from the Law. So let us thank God for giving us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Never give in then, my dear brothers, never admit defeat; keep on working at the Lord's work always, knowing that, in the Lord, you cannot be labouring in vain.

**A reading from the holy Gospel
according to Luke**

6:39–45

Jesus told a parable to his disciples, 'Can one blind man guide another? Surely both will fall into a pit? The disciple is not superior to his teacher; the fully trained disciple will always be like his teacher. Why do you observe the splinter in your brother's eye and never notice the plank in your own? How can you say to your brother, "Brother, let me take out the splinter that is in your eye," when you cannot see the plank in your own? Hypocrite! Take the plank out of your own eye first, and then you will see clearly enough to take out the splinter that is in your brother's eye.

'There is no sound tree that produces rotten fruit, nor again a rotten tree that produces sound fruit. For every tree can be told by its own fruit: people do not pick figs from thorns, nor gather grapes from brambles. A good man draws what is good from the store of goodness in his heart; a bad man draws what is bad from the store of badness. For a man's words flow out of what fills his heart.'

Second Reading

"Death, where is your victory? Death, where is your sting?" This defiant cry rings out from the conclusion to Paul's treatment of the resurrection in the fifteenth chapter of 1 Corinthians. It's an emphatic affirmation of Christ's victory over death, a victory in which believers share.

Ironically, in its original setting – Paul is quoting Hosea 13:14 – it conveys an ominous warning, not an affirmation. God threatens to summon death to punish faithless Israel. Paul puts it to the directly opposite purpose, then adds, "Let us thank God for giving us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ."

The reading as a whole sums up Paul's teaching on the resurrection, with a parting exhortation to the Corinthians not to throw in the towel. Its central message is clear, strong and consistent. This is the manner in which readers should proclaim it.

However, the words of the victory cry prompt Paul to add, "Now the sting of death is sin, and sin gets its power from the Law," and what he means by this isn't immediately obvious. Perhaps readers should treat this as a digression and use a lower tone of voice before resuming their full voice. They will need to ensure they can articulate the relatively uncommon words "perishable" and "imperishability" without stumbling over them. This letter concludes with a further chapter containing practical instructions and personal greetings which we never hear at Sunday Mass.

Gospel

As noted in the introduction to last Sunday's readings, Luke disperses some of Matthew's Sermon on the Mount through Jesus' journey to Jerusalem. Today he does the opposite. For this third passage from the Sermon on the Plain Luke draws together material from diverse places in Matthew's gospel. It forms the final section prior to the sermon's conclusion which we only ever hear in Matthew's version.

Luke strings elements of Jesus' teaching together without attempting to unify them smoothly. The first two are very short. One is an easily pictured scene of a blind person leading another into a ditch, the other a saying about the relationship between disciples and masters. The next is longer. It plays in an exaggerated way with the idea of splinters and planks in the eye in order to expose the evil of hypocrisy. Finally a connection with the first reading and psalm is established via wisdom sayings about trees and plants, the fruit they may or may not bear, and how this image can be applied to human living.

Presumably all this wisdom was common currency in Jesus' day. There are no specific indications that Jesus had taken and reworked it, though exposing and condemning hypocrisy was clearly a particular concern of his. Each part of this reading provides its own food for thought and should be proclaimed accordingly.

Concluding Blessing

May the Lord bless us and keep us.
Amen.

May he let his face shine upon us
and show us his mercy.
Amen.

May he turn his countenance towards us
and give us his 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 I, Roman Missal p 714)