

SUNDAY READINGS

READ AT HOME

First Sunday of Lent

Year C

6 March 2022



Collect

Grant, almighty God,
through the yearly observances of holy Lent,
that we may grow in understanding
of the riches hidden in Christ
and by worthy conduct pursue their effects.
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

The season of Lent, as we saw on Ash Wednesday, is both baptismal and penitential. The popularity of the ashes suggests the penitential is still at the forefront of people's minds. That's good reason to pay attention to baptismal associations such as those in today's readings. They enable the already baptised to accompany the elect on their way to initiation at the paschal vigil.

On that night, just before they are baptised, the elect are called to declare their determination to renounce sin and embrace the Christian faith. Three times they are asked to renounce sin, just as Jesus rejected the devil's enticements three times.

Three further questions elicit their assent to the Apostles Creed. This formula has an ancient ancestor in the recital we hear today, that made by the Israelites when they offer their first-fruits. Professing faith is also central in today's reading from Paul's letter to the Romans. Salvation is God's gift to those who believe in their hearts and confess with their lips that Jesus is risen Lord.

A penitential Ash Wednesday and a baptismal first Sunday of Lent combine to launch us on our paschal journey, as the first preface for Lent attests.

A reading from the book of Deuteronomy
26:4–10

Moses said to the people: 'The priest shall take the panner from your hand and lay it before the altar of the Lord your God. Then, in the sight of the Lord your God, you must make this pronouncement:

"My father was a wandering Aramaean. He went down into Egypt to find refuge there, few in numbers; but there he became a nation, great, mighty, and strong. The Egyptians ill-treated us, they gave us no peace and inflicted harsh slavery on us. But we called on the Lord, the God of our fathers. The Lord heard our voice and saw our misery, our toil and our oppression; and the Lord brought us out of Egypt with mighty hand and outstretched arm, with great terror, and with signs and wonders. He brought us here and gave us this land, a land where milk and honey flow. Here then I bring the first-fruits of the produce of the soil that you, Lord, have given me." You must then lay them before the Lord your God, and bow down in the sight of the Lord your God.'

Responsorial Psalm **Ps 90:1–2, 10–15**

R. Be with me, Lord, when I am in trouble.
He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High
and abides in the shade of the Almighty
says to the Lord: 'My refuge,
my stronghold, my God in whom I trust!' **R.**
Upon you no evil shall fall,
no plague approach where you dwell.
For you has he commanded his angels,
to keep you in all your ways. **R.**
They shall bear you upon their hands
lest you strike your foot against a stone.
On the lion and the viper you will tread
and trample the young lion and the dragon. **R.**
His love he set on me, so I will rescue him;
protect him for he knows my name.
When he calls I shall answer: 'I am with you.'
I will save him in distress and give him glory. **R.**

First Reading

During the season of Lent the first reading has independent status. It's not, as in Ordinary Time, tied to the gospel of the day. Instead it's devoted to a significant event or experience in the life of Israel. Today's reading incorporates a resumé of Israel's history from the call of Abraham to settlement in the Promised Land within the ceremony of the first-fruits.

The book of Deuteronomy concludes somewhat sadly with the news that Moses, after leading his people on their desert journey of forty years, died on Mount Nebo overlooking Jericho. He never crossed into the "land where milk and honey flow." His directives for the rite of offering the first-fruits of the soil are future-oriented. The ritual serves two purposes. It acknowledges God as the provider of life's goods. Since the harvest really belongs to God, the first part of the produce is faithfully offered back. This gesture creates an opportunity to retell Israel's story. The pronouncement functions as a confession of faith in the God who has saved them and given them successive leaders in Abraham, Joseph, Moses and Joshua.

As it stands the reading doesn't begin with any guide to what is happening. This only becomes clear at the end. All the same, readers should engage the assembly's attention with a strong delivery of the short introduction. This should lead into an authoritative recitation of the creed which forms the substance of the text. A short pause should distinguish the rubric in the last sentence from the preceding profession of faith.

Responsorial Psalm

By way of exception today's psalm relates more to the gospel than the first reading. Psalm 90/91 is an expression of confidence in God's help for one who seeks protection from harm and danger. It contains the promise, "For you has he commanded his angels, to keep you in all your ways. They shall bear you upon their hands lest you strike your foot against a stone." The devil can cite scripture for his purpose, as Shakespeare said, and that's what the devil does in the story of Jesus' temptation. These are the words he uses to entice Jesus to throw himself down from the top of the Temple. This does not become clear until the gospel is read, so the psalm must be prayed in its place and on its own merits. The opening and closing verses of Psalm 90/91 are combined to form the responsorial psalm. The response, originally an assertion from the psalm's conclusion, has been made into a petition. In this form it expresses the cry of the Israelites alluded to in the first reading, when they were oppressed in Egypt. Readers will note that the four verses of the psalm vary in character. In the most common translation, the first is a statement spelling out how a trusting Israelite prays. The following two verses are words of encouragement addressed to the person in peril. In the fourth and final verse God speaks, promising to rescue the one who cries out for help. Readers should pray the verses with careful attention to their diversity, especially the shift between the third and fourth verses.

**A reading from the letter of St Paul
to the Romans**

10:8–13

Scripture says: The word, that is the faith we proclaim, is very near to you, it is on your lips and in your heart. If your lips confess that Jesus is Lord and if you believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, then you will be saved. By believing from the heart you are made righteous; by confessing with your lips you are saved. When scripture says: those who believe in him will have no cause for shame, it makes no distinction between Jew and Greek: all belong to the same Lord who is rich enough, however many ask for his help, for everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.

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

4:1–13

Filled with the Holy Spirit, Jesus left the Jordan and was led by the Spirit through the wilderness, being tempted there by the devil for forty days. During that time he ate nothing and at the end he was hungry. Then the devil said to him, 'If you are the Son of God, tell this stone to turn into a loaf.' But Jesus replied, 'Scripture says: Man does not live on bread alone.'

Then leading him to a height, the devil showed him in a moment of time all the kingdoms of the world and said to him, 'I will give you all this power and the glory of these kingdoms, for it has been committed to me and I give it to anyone I choose. Worship me, then, and it shall all be yours.'

But Jesus answered him, 'Scripture says:

You must worship the Lord your God,
and serve him alone.'

Then he led him to Jerusalem and made him stand on the parapet of the Temple. 'If you are the Son of God,' he said to him, 'throw yourself down from here, for Scripture says:

He will put his angels in charge of you
to guard you,

and again:

They will hold you up on their hands
in case you hurt your foot against a stone.'

But Jesus answered him, 'It has been said:

You must not put the Lord your God to the test.'

Having exhausted all these ways of tempting him, the devil left him to return at the appointed time.

Second Reading

"I too am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, of the tribe of Benjamin." So declares Paul a few verses after today's reading from Romans. There's no doubting his Jewish credentials. They make his anguish all the greater. Having had a life-changing experience which convinced him that all he believed in and hoped for as a Jew had been fulfilled in Jesus Christ, he struggles with the resistance he encounters from his fellow Jews. He spends three full chapters of Romans wrestling with the issue, trying to reconcile God's fidelity with their unbelief.

This short reading comes from mid-way through Paul's argument. He appeals to the Law (Dt 30:14) and the prophets (Is 28:16; Jl 3:5) to ground his claim that salvation comes by faith and is open to all. If only his fellow Jews could see that their tradition had come to fulfilment in the person of Jesus, if only they too could believe in their hearts and confess with their lips, they would know salvation. And they would rejoice in this gift being offered to all, regardless of religious boundaries. Paul himself eventually concludes his treatment of the issue with a burst of praise: "How rich are the depths of God!" (11:33).

This text is not a neutral, albeit important, theological statement. It's Paul's own declaration of faith. He's nailing his colours to the mast. Readers need to suffuse this profound teaching of Paul's with the strength of his conviction. To do it justice they will need to invest time, prayer and practice in its preparation.

Gospel

In the first reading, the short creed recited by Israelites when offering their first-fruits acclaims God for guiding them from Egypt to the Promised Land. It makes no reference to Israel's failures of faith during their forty-year journey through the wilderness, yet these are the back story for today's gospel. Time and again with their complaints and apostasy, they refused to trust God. In complete contrast, Jesus steadfastly rejects the devil's blandishments and puts his complete trust in God. Armed only with texts from Deuteronomy, Jesus reverses Israel's infidelity and lays the foundation for a new covenant.

The event features prominently enough in the synoptic gospels for it to be recalled every year on the first Sunday of Lent. Luke's telling of the story has distinctive details of its own. The centrality of Jerusalem in his two-volume work is reflected in the temple being the location of the third and last temptation. Luke alone has the episode conclude with the devil only temporarily defeated.

The story may be familiar but Luke's masterly story-telling preserves its power to engage us. Three distinct voices are in play – those of the narrator, the tempter and Jesus – driving the action forward. It deserves to be proclaimed with a judicious blend of energy and seriousness.

Concluding Prayer

Prayer over the People (First Sunday of Lent)

May bountiful blessing, O Lord, we pray,
come down upon us, your people,
that hope may grow in tribulation,
virtue be strengthened in temptation,
and eternal redemption be assured.
Through Christ our Lord.

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 Prayer over the People for the First Sunday of Lent, Roman Missal p. 243)