

SUNDAY READINGS

READ AT HOME

Twenty-Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Year C

11 September 2022



Collect

Look upon us, O God,
Creator and ruler of all things,
and, that we may feel the working of your mercy,
grant that we may serve you with all our heart.
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

One might wonder what currency the phrase “golden calf” has these days. Perhaps even those unfamiliar with its origins still know it as a metaphor for anything we make an idol of in our lives. The biblical story (absent from the Sunday Lectionary) is colourful, but painted with such broad strokes of the brush as to be open to diverse interpretations. In brief, the people waiting at the foot of Mt Sinai for Moses to reappear grow impatient, persuade Aaron to help them fashion an image, probably of a bull, from their gold jewellery. God and Moses are outraged at this betrayal of the covenant and demand repentance. For the most part the story is deeply serious. Moses grinds the calf to dust, throws it on water and makes the people drink it. Much more grimly, several thousand are put to the sword. Amid the darkness of this tale, one detail may prompt a wry smile. When Aaron is challenged by Moses about his complicity, he replied that when the people brought him their gold, “I threw it into the fire and out came this calf” (Ex 32:24). Nothing to see here, it just happened!

This may be just the problem we all face. We don’t set out to create idols. They just happen. Sometimes they’re only exposed by crises, as they were for the prodigal son. But much of the time they require determined discernment. The pay-off is freedom of spirit.

A reading from the book of Exodus 32:7–11, 13–14

The Lord spoke to Moses, 'Go down now, because your people whom you brought out of Egypt have apostatised. They have been quick to leave the way I marked out for them; they have made themselves a calf of molten metal and have worshipped it and offered it sacrifice. "Here is your God, Israel," they have cried "who brought you up from the land of Egypt!" The Lord said to Moses, 'I can see how headstrong these people are! Leave me, now, my wrath shall blaze out against them and devour them; of you, however, I will make a great nation.'

But Moses pleaded with the Lord his God. 'Lord,' he said, 'why should your wrath blaze out against this people of yours whom you brought out of the land of Egypt with arm outstretched and mighty hand? Remember Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, your servants to whom by your own self you swore and made this promise: I will make your offspring as many as the stars of heaven, and all this land which I promised I will give to your descendants, and it shall be their heritage for ever.' So the Lord relented and did not bring on his people the disaster he had threatened.

Responsorial Psalm Ps 50:3–4, 12–13, 17, 19

R. I will rise and go to my father.

Have mercy on me, God, in your kindness.
In your compassion blot out my offense.
O wash me more and more from my guilt
and cleanse me from my sin. **R.**

A pure heart create for me, O God,
put a steadfast spirit within me.
Do not cast me away from your presence,
nor deprive me of your holy spirit. **R.**

O Lord, open my lips
and my mouth shall declare your praise.
My sacrifice, a contrite spirit;
a humbled, contrite heart you will not spurn. **R.**

A reading from the first letter of St Paul to Timothy 1:12–17

I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has given me strength, and who judged me faithful enough to call me into his service even though I used to be a blasphemer and did all I could to injure and discredit the faith. Mercy, however, was shown me, because until I became a believer I had been acting in ignorance; and the grace of our Lord filled me with faith and with the love that is in Christ Jesus. Here is a saying that you can rely on and nobody should doubt: that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners. I myself am the greatest of them; and if mercy has been shown to me, it is because Jesus Christ meant to make me the greatest evidence of his inexhaustible patience for all the other people who would later have to trust in him to come to eternal life. To the eternal King, the undying, invisible and only God, be honour and glory for ever and ever. Amen.

First Reading

The story of how the covenant between God and the Israelites was sealed in blood at the foot of Mt Sinai is told every three years on the feast of the Body and Blood of Christ. We never hear how the episode concludes – with Moses staying on the mountain forty days and nights (Ex 14:18). Several chapters of instructions for a shrine for the ark of the covenant follow. The story resumes with the people taking advantage of Moses' absence to fashion a golden calf (31:18 ff).

Today's reading recounts the consequences. It consists of an impassioned exchange between God and Moses. God laments the people's apostasy and determines to punish those responsible. Moses responds with a plea to God on the basis of God's past saving actions and promises for the future. Moses' appeal to God's "better nature," as it were, succeeds and God relents. The story enhances Moses' reputation as a powerful intercessor. It also presents God as one who can be persuaded to let mercy triumph over justice. The gospel will depict this mercy even more memorably.

There are only a few scraps of narrative in this reading. They simply frame the core of the text constituted by God's outburst and Moses' entreaty. Readers should readily contrast God's anger with Moses' measured reasonableness.

Responsorial Psalm

Sin and forgiveness are writ large in the first reading where communal public apostasy is matched by mercy for all. The psalm shifts our focus to the personal and interior realm. Psalm 50/51 is an outstanding example of an act of contrition and a humble prayer for forgiveness. Unsurprisingly it is used several times in the season of Lent, but the response, unmistakably sourced from the parable of the prodigal son, is unique to today.

The verses look back and ahead. The psalmist's plea for "a pure heart," "a steadfast spirit" and "your holy spirit" harks back to the prophecies of Jeremiah (31:33) and especially Ezekiel (36:27). On the other hand, the reference to washing sin and guilt away will remind Christians of baptism. The baptism of repentance practised by John paved the way for Peter the apostle's call on Pentecost Day: "you must be baptised in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins" (Acts 2:38).

Readers have a heartfelt prayer to lead. It is both a confession of sin and a declaration of trust in the mercy of God. If prayed with sincere devotion, it should prompt the assembly to recite the response with conviction.

A reading from the holy Gospel according to Luke 15:1–32

The tax collectors and the sinners were all seeking the company of Jesus to hear what he had to say, and the Pharisees and the scribes complained. 'This man' they said 'welcomes sinners and eats with them.' So he spoke this parable to them:

'What man among you with a hundred sheep, losing one, would not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the missing one till he found it? And when he found it, would he not joyfully take it on his shoulders and then, when he got home, call together his friends and neighbours? "Rejoice with me," he would say, "I have found my sheep that was lost." In the same way, I tell you, there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one repentant sinner than over ninety-nine virtuous men who have no need of repentance.

'Or again, what woman with ten drachmas would not, if she lost one, light a lamp and sweep out the house and search thoroughly till she found it? And then, when she had found it, call together her friends and neighbours? "Rejoice with me," she would say "I have found the drachma I lost." In the same way, I tell you, there is rejoicing among the angels of God over one repentant sinner.'

[He also said, 'A man had two sons. The younger said to his father, "Father, let me have the share of the estate that would come to me." So the father divided the property between them. A few days later, the younger son got together everything he had and left for a distant country where he squandered his money on a life of debauchery.

'When he had spent it all, that country experienced a severe famine, and now he began to feel the pinch, so he hired himself out to one of the local inhabitants who put him on his farm to feed the pigs. And he would willingly have filled his belly with the husks the pigs were eating but no one offered him anything. Then he came to his senses and said, "How many of my father's paid servants have more food than they want, and here am I dying of hunger! I will leave this place and go to my father and say: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you; I no longer deserve to be called your son; treat me as one of your paid servants." So he left the place and went back to his father.

'While he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was moved with pity. He ran to the boy, clasped him in his arms and kissed him tenderly. Then his son said, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I no longer deserve to be called your son." But the father said to his servants, "Quick! Bring out the best robe and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the calf we have been fattening, and kill it; we are going to have a feast, a celebration, because this son of mine was dead and has come back to life; he was lost and is found." And they began to celebrate.

'Now the elder son was out in the fields, and on his way back, as he drew near the house, he could hear music and dancing. Calling one of the servants he asked what it was all about.

"Your brother has come" replied the servant, "and your father has killed the calf we had fattened because he has got him back safe and sound." He was angry then and refused to go in, and his father came out to plead with him; but he answered his father, "Look, all these years I have slaved for you and never once disobeyed your orders, yet you never offered me so much as a kid for me to celebrate with my friends.

But, for this son of yours, when he comes back after swallowing up your property - he and his women - you kill the calf we had been fattening."

'The father said, "My son, you are with me always and all I have is yours. But it was only right we should celebrate and rejoice, because your brother here was dead and has come to life; he was lost and is found.'"]

[Short Form: omit text in brackets.]

Second Reading

Neither of the two letters addressed to Timothy give us any biographical information about him, apart from him being Paul's "loyal child in the faith" entrusted with oversight of the community at Ephesus (1 Tim 1:2-3). From the Acts of the Apostles, we learn that his mother was Jewish and his father Greek and that he was a companion of Paul's on his missionary journeys as well as an occasional emissary.

This first of three readings from the first letter to Timothy is all about Paul. It's an account of his transition from doing all he could "to injure and discredit the faith" to being filled "with faith and with the love that is in Christ Jesus." This serves two purposes: it establishes his apostolic authority and it offers assurance to false teachers that they too can be saved.

It needs to be said that most scholars now believe this letter, along with 2 Timothy and Titus, was not written by Paul himself but by a later author invoking Paul's name. One of the clues to a post-Pauline date for these letters is the repeated use of the phrase "this is a saying you can rely on," suggesting a later concern for authentic tradition. There are also allusions to the development of Church offices. Nonetheless it remains convenient to speak of the author as Paul.

The nature of this reading as a confession of thanksgiving needs to be appreciated by readers. It calls for a delivery that is strong, positive and sincere. True to Paul's style, the sentences are long and elaborate. Careful preparation will equip readers to lead the assembly through its abundance of thought to the final exclamation of praise.

Gospel

After the severity of last Sunday's reading on the demands of discipleship, today's parables of mercy and forgiveness come as a welcome relief. That may be a good reason to choose the longer option with all three stories, even if that of the prodigal son is very familiar and has been heard during Lent. Furthermore, that's where the psalm response comes from.

The story of the woman searching for her lost coin is peculiar to Luke and also typical of his concern to bring women into focus in his gospel. Matthew has a version of the lost sheep story but it's never heard on Sunday. The parable of the prodigal son (arguably not well named given the crucial roles played by the forgiving father and the aggrieved brother) is also found in Luke alone, though it has an affinity with Matthew's story of a father with two sons (21:28-32).

The setting of the parables – a meal with "tax collectors and sinners" whom Jesus is accused of welcoming – draws attention to the eucharist as a sacrament of forgiveness. The words spoken over the cup always testify that the blood of Jesus was poured out "for the forgiveness of sins." The stories Jesus tells are enacted in the table-fellowship of the eucharistic liturgy.

The full gospel thus consists of four parts – an introduction and three stories. The cherished place these parables have in the Christian mind should be reflected in a lively and loving proclamation.

Concluding Prayer

Solemn Blessing (Ordinary Time VI)

May God bless us with every heavenly blessing,
make us always holy and pure in his sight,
pour out in abundance upon us the riches of his glory,
and teach us with the words of truth;
may he instruct us in the Gospel of salvation,
and ever endow us with fraternal charity.
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 Solemn Blessing for Ordinary Time VI, Roman Missal p. 717)