

SUNDAY READINGS

READ AT HOME

First Sunday of Lent

Year B

21 February 2021



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,
one God, for ever and ever.
Amen.

Readings and Commentaries

The season of Lent, as the preface says, is a gift. It offers us the time and space to stand back and look at the big picture – the big picture of our human condition within the horizon of divine love. We survey the whole story of salvation from the dawn of creation to the climax of Jesus' mission among us. At no other time of the year do we engage in such a sustained exploration of our vocation as human beings.

Our principal guides on the way are the great story-tellers of the Old Testament, the dynamic and provocative preacher Paul, and above all Jesus himself via the evangelists Mark and John. Today's ensemble of readings invites us into the grand sweep of God's saving work in our human history from his covenant with Noah after the flood, through the earthly mission of Jesus, to our life in the risen Lord through baptism. The time has come to turn around and believe the Good News; the reign of God is at hand.

A reading from the book of Genesis 9:8–15

God spoke to Noah and his sons, 'See, I establish my Covenant with you, and with your descendants after you; also with every living creature to be found with you, birds, cattle and every wild beast with you: everything that came out of the ark, everything that lives on the earth. I establish my Covenant with you: nothing of flesh shall be swept away again by the waters of the flood. There shall be no flood to destroy the earth again.'

God said, 'Here is the sign of the Covenant I make between myself and you and every living creature with you for all generations: I set my bow in the clouds and it shall be a sign of the Covenant between me and the earth. When I gather the clouds over the earth and the bow appears in the clouds, I will recall the Covenant between myself and you and every living creature of every kind. And so the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all things of flesh.'

First Reading

The story of Noah and of the flood is given a very prominent place in the early chapters of the book of Genesis. Today's excerpt comes from the latter part of the story. The flood has already occurred and receded, all the occupants of the ark have disembarked, and Noah has offered sacrifice to renew the relationship between God and humankind.

Now God establishes a covenant with Noah's people and the whole of creation, pledging that there would never again be such a flood to destroy the earth. This is one of a succession of covenants forged between God and Israel, and each has a sign: circumcision for that with Abraham, the sabbath for the Mosaic covenant. The sign given to Noah is the rainbow. The scope of the covenant brings to mind the story of God's original work of creation in the book of Genesis that opens the whole Bible.

The fact that the reading consists of God's declaration to Noah and spells out the terms of the covenant means that it has both a solemn and a personal quality to it. It should be proclaimed with a combination of warmth and gravity. For all its seriousness the message is entirely positive. The covenant with Noah is good news for him and his descendants and for all creatures.

Responsorial Psalm

Ps 24:4–9

R. Your ways, O Lord, are love and truth
to those who keep your covenant.

Lord, make me know your ways.

Lord, teach me your paths.

Make me walk in your truth, and teach me:
for you are God my saviour. **R.**

Remember your mercy, Lord,
and the love you have shown from of old.
In your love remember me,
because of your goodness, O Lord. **R.**

The Lord is good and upright.
He shows the path to those who stray,
he guides the humble in the right path;
he teaches his way to the poor. **R.**

Responsorial Psalm

Psalm 24/25 is the prayer of a person in great distress who calls on God for his saving help as of old, though this is not evident in the verses that we pray. The three verses all breathe a calm spirit of confident trust, though elsewhere in the psalm there are heartfelt cries for help.

The response is rather long and probably not familiar to the congregation. Readers will need to announce it very clearly and at a moderate pace to give everyone a chance to pick it up. They may even need to repeat it with the congregation the first time round.

As we have it the first two verses are in the form of a prayer to God for the gifts of wisdom, truth, mercy, love and goodness. The tone readers will naturally adopt is one of trusting faith in the giver of all good gifts. The third verse is a declaration, a simple confession of faith in the loving-kindness of God.

A reading from the first letter of St Peter 3:18–22

Christ himself, innocent though he was, died once for sins, died for the guilty, to lead us to God. In the body he was put to death, in the spirit he was raised to life, and, in the spirit, he went to preach to the spirits in prison. Now it was long ago, when Noah was still building that ark which saved only a small group of eight people 'by water', and when God was still waiting patiently, that these spirits refused to believe. That water is a type of the baptism which saves you now, and which is not the washing off of physical dirt but a pledge made to God from a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who has entered heaven and is at God's right hand, now that he has made the angels and Dominations and Powers his subjects.

Second Reading

The second reading makes reference to the story of Noah and the flood and thus makes a direct connection with the baptismal current that flows through the seasons of Lent and Easter. It is clearly a sound choice for this Sunday, especially for the elect who are making their final preparations for baptismal initiation.

All the same, it is not an easy text to understand and to proclaim. Not only does it draw on ancient ideas and now unfamiliar ways of thinking, but much of it is expressed in quite complex sentences. Even today some of the expressions are rather obscure, such as "a pledge made to God from a good conscience".

Readers will need to read this through several times in order to get a feel for how the passage holds together. For those using the standard lectionary it may be a worthwhile exercise to write out the reading (especially the long final sentence) in sense lines like those of the NRSV. The aim for readers should be to enable the congregation to sense the connection between the waters of the flood and the waters of baptism, and that between our baptism and Jesus' death and resurrection. This is a lot to grasp in one hearing, so the proclamation needs to be clear and thoughtful.

A reading from the holy Gospel according to Mark

1:12–15

The Spirit drove Jesus out into the wilderness and he remained there for forty days, and was tempted by Satan. He was with the wild beasts, and the angels looked after him.

After John had been arrested, Jesus went into Galilee. There he proclaimed the Good News from God. 'The time has come' he said 'and the kingdom of God is close at hand. Repent, and believe the Good News.'

Gospel

The story of Jesus' testing in the wilderness is found in all three synoptic gospels so we hear it every year in the course of the three year cycle. Today we hear from Mark. His account is very brief and matter-of-fact in comparison with the longer versions in Matthew and Luke. These two have much in common, as well as distinct emphases of their own. Comparing them all carefully is a rewarding exercise.

Mark seems to offer us no more than bare bones but each phrase in these few verses is full of meaning. Almost every word has rich associations. Consider "Spirit", "drove", "wilderness", and "forty days", just for a start. They conjure up the whole history of God's people of old, now culminating in the emergence of a new and authoritative prophet.

Mark's brevity allows us to hear the direct connection between Jesus' testing in the wilderness and the inauguration of his mission. We heard Jesus' clarion call some Sundays ago, but it is all to the good that we hear it again at the onset of this season of repentance and renewal.

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)