

SUNDAY READINGS

READ AT HOME

Second Sunday of Lent

Year B

28 February 2021



Collect

O God, who have commanded us
to listen to your beloved Son,
be pleased, we pray,
to nourish us inwardly by your word,
that, with spiritual sight made pure,
we may rejoice to behold your glory.
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

Just as we always hear the story of Jesus' testing on the first Sunday of Lent, so we always hear of his transfiguration on the second.

One way of interpreting this choice is to see the story of the transfiguration as a source of encouragement for us on our Lenten journey. If we were disheartened by the challenge of last Sunday's gospel, then we might be reassured today by the vision of Jesus' glory. The story of the transfiguration follows on from Paul's emphatic affirmation that God is on our side, a declaration that we might well welcome after the disturbing story of Abraham and Isaac.

Appealing as it is, the gospel story makes it clear that we can't escape into an imaginary paradise as Peter was tempted to do. Jesus must come down from the mountain and continue on his way. This is the choice he makes. He faces up to the fate that awaits him in Jerusalem. What about us? Will we continue to follow him all the way to Calvary and beyond?

A reading from the book of Genesis

22:1–2, 9–13, 15–18

God put Abraham to the test. 'Abraham, Abraham' he called. 'Here I am' he replied. 'Take your son,' God said 'your only child Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah. There you shall offer him as a burnt offering, on a mountain I will point out to you.'

When they arrived at the place God had pointed out to him, Abraham built an altar there and arranged the wood. Then he stretched out his hand and seized the knife to kill his son. But the angel of the Lord called to him from heaven, 'Abraham, Abraham' he said. 'I am here' he replied. 'Do not raise your hand against the boy' the angel said. 'Do not harm him, for now I know you fear God. You have not refused me your son, your only son.' Then looking up, Abraham saw a ram caught by its horns in a bush. Abraham took the ram and offered it as a burnt-offering in place of his son.

The angel of the Lord called Abraham a second time from heaven. 'I swear by my own self - it is the Lord who speaks - because you have done this, because you have not refused me your son, your only son, I will shower blessings on you, I will make your descendants as many as the stars of heaven and the grains of sand on the seashore. Your descendants shall gain possession of the gates of their enemies. All the nations of the earth shall bless themselves by your descendants, as a reward for your obedience.'

Responsorial Psalm

Ps 115:10, 15–19

R. I will walk in the presence of the Lord,
in the land of the living.

I trusted, even when I said:
'I am sorely afflicted.'

O precious in the eyes of the Lord
is the death of his faithful. **R.**

Your servant, Lord, your servant am I;
you have loosened my bonds.

A thanksgiving sacrifice I make:
I will call on the Lord's name. **R.**

My vows to the Lord I will fulfil
before all his people,
in the courts of the house of the Lord,
in your midst, O Jerusalem. **R.**

First Reading

During Lent the first reading does not have the explicit connection with the gospel that is the case in Ordinary Time. In Lent the Old Testament texts are chosen for their own importance in the story of salvation. Today we hear one that is prominent in both Jewish and Christian tradition: Abraham's call to sacrifice his son Isaac. It is one of the high-value readings selected for the Easter Vigil, where it is given both in full and in the abridged version read today.

The story of Abraham's testing by God takes us to the brink. Not only is it full of foreboding and suspense, but it is also confronting. The fact that God is prepared to test Abraham to the extreme by asking for the sacrifice of his only son Isaac, and that Abraham is willing to obey, can still shock us.

Unfortunately the shorter form does not allow the full drama of the episode to be felt. Readers would do well to take up the book of Genesis and read the whole story for themselves (22:1-18). As we have the reading we are brought all too quickly to the moment when Abraham is poised to plunge his knife into Isaac and the angel intervenes. Neither the brevity of the story nor the happy ending should diminish the horror that we feel at the prospect of Isaac's killing.

The reader is called to deliver the story in a variety of voices: those of the narrator, God, Abraham, and the angel. The reading itself should make it clear how each voice should be differentiated. The final section – the promise of all the blessings that will be given to Abraham because of his trust in God – should not be hurried over. As the counterbalance to God's earlier demands, it allows us to get the whole story in proper perspective.

Responsorial Psalm

Psalm 115/116 is a prayer of thanksgiving from one who has been saved from unidentified distress, perhaps grave illness and the threat of death. The response, taken from the psalm itself, matches this scenario. One should not try and interpret the psalm too literally in relation to the first reading. It serves as a general expression of trust and thankfulness on the part of one who has sought God's help and been saved.

The statement in the first verse – "O precious in the eyes of the Lord is the death of his faithful" – is difficult to understand. It seems to go counter both to the spirit of the psalm as well as to the story we have just heard. The assertion is made less puzzling in one version (the New Jerusalem Bible) by its translation of "precious" as "costly".

Apart from the somewhat obscure meaning of this sentence, the psalm is straightforward enough. It should be readily prayed aloud with confident devotion.

A reading from the letter of St Paul to the Romans 8:31–34

With God on our side who can be against us? Since God did not spare his own Son, but gave him up to benefit us all, we may be certain, after such a gift, that he will not refuse anything he can give. Could anyone accuse those that God has chosen? When God acquits, could anyone condemn? Could Christ Jesus? No! He not only died for us - he rose from the dead, and there at God's right hand he stands and pleads for us.

A reading from the holy Gospel according to Mark 9:2–10

Jesus took with him Peter and James and John and led them up a high mountain where they could be alone by themselves. There in their presence he was transfigured: his clothes became dazzlingly white, whiter than any earthly bleacher could make them. Elijah appeared to them with Moses; and they were talking with Jesus. Then Peter spoke to Jesus. 'Rabbi,' he said 'it is wonderful for us to be here; so let us make three tents, one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah.' He did not know what to say; they were so frightened. And a cloud came, covering them in shadow; and there came a voice from the cloud, 'This is my Son, the Beloved. Listen to him.' Then suddenly, when they looked round, they saw no one with them any more but only Jesus.

As they came down the mountain he warned them to tell no one what they had seen, until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead. They observed the warning faithfully, though among themselves they discussed what 'rising from the dead' could mean.

Second Reading

The few verses that form the second reading come from late in the eighth chapter of Paul's great letter to the Romans. They make more sense when seen in the light of the preceding section (8:18-30) in which Paul acknowledges that the whole of creation is "groaning in one great act of giving birth" and that we too "groan inwardly as we wait for our bodies to be set free". In our weakness, Paul declares, the Spirit and the risen Lord intercede for us.

There can be no doubt about what Paul is affirming here. Simply put, God is on our side; what more proof could we have than that God gave his only Son, who died and rose for us, and who continues to intercede for us? We have no grounds for fearing accusation and condemnation.

The reading may be short and its message simple, but the way Paul argues his case is rather complex. For a start he moves unexpectedly into courtroom mode, speaking of accusation, condemnation, acquittal and pleading. In this mode he proceeds by way of a series of questions.

The two translations given here differ quite markedly. The one from the regular (Jerusalem Bible) lectionary gives an emphatic answer to the question: "Could Christ Jesus [condemn]? No! He not only died for us...". The NRSV offers no answers, only a string of questions. This form presents a greater challenge if readers, as they should, are to proclaim the text clearly and intelligibly. Even the JB version will require careful preparation and measured pacing.

Gospel

The story of the transfiguration is one of the richest in the gospel. It has links to some of the great figures and events of the Jewish tradition, especially Moses and Elijah and all they signified. It echoes the accounts of God revealing himself on holy mountains and in natural phenomena such as thunder and lightning and storm. It connects with the foundational story of the exodus when the Israelites dwelt in tents and were led by cloud and fire.

The narrative of the transfiguration also has important associations with other gospel stories. The words spoken from the cloud – "This is my Son, the Beloved. Listen to him" – parallel those spoken on the occasion of Jesus' baptism. And the naming of Peter, James and John reminds us of other occasions when they are Jesus' chosen companions, especially at his prayer in the garden of Gethsemane. Every one of these associations invites exploration.

Yet for all these allusions to people and events in the Old Testament and the gospels, the story of the transfiguration is suffused with mystery. To mine its riches we need to enter into it with imagination rather than a critical scientific mind-set. It invites prolonged meditation if we are to grasp what is being revealed to us about Jesus and our discipleship of him. In the end the challenge is to come down from the mountain with Jesus and journey with him to Jerusalem.

Concluding Prayer

Prayer over the People (Second Sunday of Lent)

Bless your faithful, we pray, O Lord,
with a blessing that endures for ever,
and keep us faithful
to the Gospel of your Only Begotten Son,
so that we may always desire and at last attain
that glory whose beauty he showed in his own Body,
to the amazement of his Apostles.
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 Second Sunday of Lent,
Roman Missal p. 252)