

SUNDAY READINGS

READ AT HOME

Third Sunday of Lent

Year B

7 March 2021



Collect

O God, author of every mercy and of all goodness,
who in fasting, prayer and almsgiving
have shown us a remedy for sin,
look graciously on this confession of our lowliness,
that we, who are bowed down by our conscience,
may always be lifted up by your mercy.
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

Now that our Lenten journey is well under way, we move into a new phase of the season. So far we've been guided by the twin stories of Jesus' testing in the wilderness and his transfiguration on the holy mountain.

In Year A the following three Sunday gospels, all from John, present Jesus as the living water (4:5-42), the light of the world (9:1-41), and the resurrection and the life (11:1-45). So central are these stories in the liturgical tradition, and so apt for the preparation of the elect for their baptism at Easter, that these gospels and the readings that go with them may be read every year. These texts are printed on page 152.

The Year B gospel texts are also taken from John: the cleansing of the temple, Jesus' dialogue with Nicodemus, and an alternative "agony in the garden". One after the other they bring into focus for us the person of Jesus, his mission, and the challenge of discipleship. Together with key stories from the Old Testament and telling passages from Paul and the letter to the Hebrews, they raise serious questions for us would-be followers of Jesus to wrestle with along the way.

A reading from the book of Exodus 20:1–17

The Lord spoke all these words. He said, 'I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the house of slavery. 'You shall have no gods except me.

[You shall not make yourself a carved image or any likeness of anything in heaven or earth beneath or in the waters under the earth; you shall not bow down to them or serve them. For I, the Lord your God am a jealous God and I punish the father's fault in the sons, the grandsons, and the great-grandsons of those who hate me; but I show kindness to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments.]

'You shall not utter the name of the Lord your God to misuse it, for the Lord will not leave unpunished the man who utters his name to misuse it.

'Remember the sabbath day and keep it holy. [For six days you shall labour and do all your work, but the seventh day is a sabbath for the Lord your God. You shall do no work on that day, neither you nor your animals nor the stranger who lives with you. For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth and the sea and all that these hold, but on the seventh day he rested; that is why the Lord has blessed the sabbath day and made it sacred.]

'Honour your father and your mother so that you may have a long life in the land that the Lord your God has given to you.

'You shall not kill. 'You shall not commit adultery. 'You shall not steal. 'You shall not bear false witness against your neighbour.

'You shall not covet your neighbour's house. You shall not covet your neighbour's wife, or his servant, man or woman, or his ox, or his donkey, or anything that is his.

[Short Form: omit text in brackets.]

Responsorial Psalm

Ps 18:8–11

R. Lord, you have the words of everlasting life.

The law of the Lord is perfect,
it revives the soul.

The rule of the Lord is to be trusted,
it gives wisdom to the simple. **R.**

The precepts of the Lord are right,
they gladden the heart.

The command of the Lord is clear,
it gives light to the eyes. **R.**

The fear of the Lord is holy,
abiding for ever.

The decrees of the Lord are truth
and all of them just. **R.**

They are more to be desired than gold,
than the purest of gold
and sweeter are they than honey,
than honey from the comb. **R.**

First Reading

What we are accustomed to call the ten "commandments" were originally referred to as "words". That's how the reading from the book of Exodus begins: "God spoke all these words". One might wonder how much more welcome these rules of covenant conduct would have been down through the ages if they had always been called "words" instead of "commandments". And also if they had always been interpreted through the opening declaration: "I am the God who brought you out of . . . the house of slavery". The God of these words is the God of liberation, not moral imposition.

An alternative list of the ten words is found in the book of Deuteronomy (5: 6-21), while there are numerous mentions of individual commands elsewhere. Short forms of the list are cited by Jesus and by Paul.

The lectionary offers a much abbreviated text as an alternative, but the full reading is not very long and should be preferred unless pastoral considerations dictate otherwise.

More than ever readers should wait until the congregation is settled before commencing the reading because the opening lines are so important. They are the key to all that follows. The "words" establish a code of conduct that is to define Israel as God's chosen people. They define the boundaries within which freedom is to be found. Each one should be given due weight and not hurried through.

Responsorial Psalm

Psalm 18/19 offers praise to God for the glory that is revealed both in creation and in the law. Given the first reading, the verses selected for today focus on the gift of the law.

By way of exception, the response does not come from the psalm at all but from the gospel of John. It's based on Peter's response to Jesus at the end of his discourse on the bread of life: "Lord, who shall we go to? You have the message of eternal life" (Jn 6:68).

The gospel phrase "words of everlasting life" serves to interpret the psalm's vocabulary of "law", "rule", "precept", "command" and "decrees". As with the reading from Exodus, the legal language can camouflage the hidden truth. The intent of the Mosaic law was to forge the identity of Israel as God's covenant community, liberated and loved.

The poetry of the psalms delights in repetition and restatement, as is evident here. Readers will need to take care with the very short lines. Each should be allowed to speak for itself and not be run on into the following line.

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

1:22–25

While the Jews demand miracles and the Greeks look for wisdom, here are we preaching a crucified Christ; to the Jews an obstacle that they cannot get over, to the pagans madness, but to those who have been called, whether they are Jews or Greeks, a Christ who is the power and the wisdom of God. For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength.

A reading from the holy Gospel according to John

2:13–25

Just before the Jewish Passover Jesus went up to Jerusalem, and in the Temple he found people selling cattle and sheep and pigeons, and the money changers sitting at their counters there. Making a whip out of some cord, he drove them all out of the Temple, cattle and sheep as well, scattered the money changers' coins, knocked their tables over and said to the pigeon-sellers, 'Take all this out of here and stop turning my Father's house into a market.' Then his disciples remembered the words of scripture: Zeal for your house will devour me. The Jews intervened and said, 'What sign can you show us to justify what you have done?' Jesus answered, 'Destroy this sanctuary, and in three days I will raise it up.' The Jews replied, 'It has taken forty-six years to build this sanctuary: are you going to raise it up in three days?' But he was speaking of the sanctuary that was his body, and when Jesus rose from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this, and they believed the scripture and the words he had said.

During his stay in Jerusalem for the Passover many believed in his name when they saw the signs that he gave, but Jesus knew them all and did not trust himself to them; he never needed evidence about any man; he could tell what a man had in him.

Second Reading

The Christian community at Corinth to which Paul wrote was torn by division and factionalism. One of the issues causing discord was the claim by some members of the community to a superior wisdom. Today's short reading is part of Paul's attempt to address this issue.

He is typically forthright. The mystery at the heart of Christian faith is the crucified Christ. There is no escaping the challenge that this paradox presents. It is offensive both to religious tradition and to human reason. Only the gift of faith enables us to see the power and wisdom of God in what appears to be utter folly and weakness. Paul confronts the self-satisfied Corinthians with the mystery that undercuts all human claims: the cross.

The reading draws its strength from the multiple tensions between Christ and those whom Paul names as "Jews" and "Greeks". The interplay of these opposing points of view drives the reading towards its paradoxical conclusion. It is a powerful text that readers should deliver in a deliberate and serious tone, while ensuring that it is heard for what it is: good news.

Gospel

John tells the story of the cleansing of the temple very early in his gospel, shortly after the beginning of Jesus' ministry. In this he differs from the three other evangelists. They present it late in their gospels as the last straw which brings Jesus' conflict with the religious authorities to a head and finally provokes his execution. Also in contrast to the synoptics, John has Jesus come to Jerusalem for a number of Passovers; this is the first.

By placing this event so early, John achieves two things. He establishes a dynamic of confrontation between Jesus and the authorities that will be played out from this point on in a variety of ways. And he introduces the theme of Jesus as the new temple. This focus, central both to this episode and to the gospel as a whole, is unique to John and colours his account of the cleansing.

It might be argued that if John hasn't already established himself as a master dramatist by this stage of the gospel, the story of the cleansing of the temple achieves that for him. It is impressively told, combining narrative, dialogue and action in a powerful whole that suggests layers of meaning to be uncovered. As John says in the original conclusion to his gospel, "these [signs] are recorded so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing this you may have life through his name" (20:31).

Concluding Prayer

Prayer over the People (Third Sunday of Lent)

Direct, O Lord, we pray, the hearts of your faithful,
and in your kindness grant your servants this grace:
that, abiding in the love of you and their neighbour,
they may fulfil the whole of your commands.
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 Third Sunday of Lent, Roman Missal p. 262)