

SUNDAY READINGS

READ AT HOME

Eleventh Sunday in Ordinary Time

Year B

13 June 2021



Collect

O God, strength of those who hope in you,
graciously hear our pleas,
and, since without you mortal frailty can do nothing,
grant us always the help of your grace,
that in following your commands
we may please you by our resolve and our deeds.
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

Early in his gospel Mark observes that people were “astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes” (1:22). As the gospel unfolds we find that that Jesus does much of his teaching in parables.

This is what Gerhard Lohfink says in his book *Jesus of Nazareth: What He Wanted, Who He Was*: “Jesus was a master of brief, striking sayings and skilled at telling stories in images and parables. . . [These] have never been equalled in quality . . . With them he leads his listeners into a world with which they are already familiar or at least one that they have heard about . . . But at the same time he makes that world alien and thus blows up the well-worn paths of customary pious thinking. Jesus wants to show that the reign of God has its own logic” (p 120).

No wonder that the question was raised as to whether Jesus was hiding or revealing the truth when he spoke in parables! They never cease to intrigue us and invite us into his unique way of seeing the world.

A reading from the prophet Ezekiel**17:22–24**

The Lord says this:

'From the top of the cedar,
 from the highest branch I will take a shoot
 and plant it myself on a very high mountain.
 I will plant it on the high mountain of Israel.
 It will sprout branches and bear fruit,
 and become a noble cedar.
 Every kind of bird will live beneath it,
 every winged creature rest
 in the shade of its branches.
 And every tree of the field will learn
 that I, the Lord, am the one
 who stunts tall trees and makes the low ones grow,
 who withers green trees
 and makes the withered green.
 I, the Lord, have spoken, and I will do it.'

Responsorial Psalm**Ps 91:2–3, 13–16****R.** Lord it is good to give thanks to you.

It is good to give thanks to the Lord
 to make music to your name, O Most High,
 to proclaim your love in the morning
 and your truth in the watches of the night. **R.**

The just will flourish like the palm-tree
 and grow like a Lebanon cedar. **R.**

Planted in the house of the Lord
 they will flourish in the courts of our God,
 still bearing fruit when they are old,
 still full of sap, still green,
 to proclaim that the Lord is just.
 In him, my rock, there is no wrong. **R.**

First Reading

It may only become clear after the gospel has been read why this passage from the prophet Ezekiel has been chosen for today. This illustrates an important principle in the lectionary. Although the reading from the Old Testament is always heard first (except during Easter when we have no reading from the Jewish scriptures), it is not selected until the gospel text has first been determined.

Today's gospel contains the parable of the tiny mustard seed that grows into a shrub that can shelter the birds of the air. The reading from Ezekiel has a similar image. God will plant a sprig of cedar that will grow into a great tree and provide a resting-place for "every kind of bird". Once the gospel has been heard the connection will be obvious, but until then the congregation may find the prophecy puzzling.

The reading itself gives no clue to the original context. Ezekiel's mission was to encourage the exiles in Babylon and reinforce their faith in the power and holiness of the one true God. With the image of the cedar shoot he assures the exiles that God will restore Israel to its full nobility. The passage concludes with a ringing affirmation of the power of God's word; what God says will be done, as it was at the dawn of time and again in the person of Jesus.

The fact that its meaning may not be immediately evident to the congregation should make the reader all the more determined to proclaim it so well that everyone will remember it when the gospel is proclaimed. The challenge is to enable the congregation to visualise the image; the reader must use the prophetic words to paint a picture.

Responsorial Psalm

Psalm 91/92 is a song of thanksgiving to God as Creator and as Redeemer, though neither of these two themes is made explicit in the verses that we pray. These are taken from the opening and concluding sections of the psalm. The response is an adaptation of the very first line, changing it from a statement – "It is good to give thanks to the Lord" – into a personal address – "Lord, it is good to give thanks to you".

What we have as the responsorial psalm conveys a sense of cosmic and moral order. Just as night follows morning in the cycle of time, so the just will "flourish like the palm-tree and grow like a Lebanon cedar", for "the Lord is just" and "in him, my rock, there is no wrong". This, of course, is not the sum total of human experience; there are plenty of psalms that are cries of distress and anger and pain. But today we are invited to affirm the ultimate trustworthiness of God.

The principal challenge for the reader is to deal with the different lengths of the verses, starting with the common four-line pattern, then shifting to a two-line arrangement and finishing with a six-line formation. Good use of intonation, measured pace and visual cues will enable the congregation to respond at the proper time. Readers should not resort to the intrusive command, "Response".

A reading from the second letter of St Paul to the Corinthians 5:6–10

We are always full of confidence when we remember that to live in the body means to be exiled from the Lord, going as we do by faith and not by sight - we are full of confidence, I say, and actually want to be exiled from the body and make our home with the Lord. Whether we are living in the body or exiled from it, we are intent on pleasing him. For all the truth about us will be brought out in the law court of Christ, and each of us will get what he deserves for the things he did in the body, good or bad.

A reading from the holy Gospel according to Mark 4:26–34

Jesus said to the crowd, 'This is what the kingdom of God is like. A man throws seed on the land. Night and day, while he sleeps, when he is awake, the seed is sprouting and growing; how, he does not know. Of its own accord the land produces first the shoot, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear. And when the crop is ready, he loses no time; he starts to reap because the harvest has come.'

He also said, 'What can we say the kingdom of God is like? What parable can we find for it? It is like a mustard seed which at the time of its sowing in the soil is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; yet once it is sown it grows into the biggest shrub of them all and puts out big branches so that the birds of the air can shelter in its shade.'

Using many parables like these, he spoke the word to them, so far as they were capable of understanding it. He would not speak to them except in parables, but he explained everything to his disciples when they were alone.

Second Reading

Paul's second letter to the Corinthians is the subject of much scholarly argument. It is regarded as one of his most difficult writings to interpret. Its abrupt changes in mood and style and content have led many to suggest that what we now have is actually a combination of several different letters, written at different times for different purposes. This is very helpful for the reader to know. It means that each excerpt has to be treated on its own terms.

More often than not we miss hearing from the early chapters of Paul's second letter to the Corinthians because of the variable date of Easter. Today's short reading comes from the early part of Chapter 5, but it forms the conclusion to a section of the letter that began in Chapter 4 (4:7–5:10).

Paul's account of the hardships and successes of his apostolic mission lead him to reflect on life and death. Is it better to live in the body "exiled from the Lord" or to be "exiled from the body and [at] home with the Lord"? Readers who prepare this text carefully will realise that Paul's mind is racing; the words can hardly keep up with the thoughts. This is not a calm and considered piece of logic. The ideas tumble out and lead unexpectedly to the image of the law court.

Readers would do well to ensure that the congregation clearly hears the key affirmations: "we are always full of confidence" (this one is repeated), "going as we do by faith and not by sight" and "we are intent on pleasing him".

Gospel

Almost the whole of the fourth chapter of Mark is devoted to parables. It includes four parables, an interpretation, and two explanatory statements about teaching in parables. Today's excerpt contains two of the parables and a concluding editorial comment.

The first of the parables – that of the seed growing by itself – is unique to Mark. Jesus is inviting his hearers, now us, to trust that there is an inherent dynamic power in the kingdom of God that assures its growth. As mysterious as this power may be, it is sure to achieve its purpose. Perhaps the Church remembered this story in a time of faltering faith.

The same may be the case for the second of the parables (found also in Luke and Matthew), that of the mustard seed. The contrast between the insignificant seed and the large shrub that it produces invites believers to take heart even when beginnings are unpromising.

The concluding remarks about Jesus' practice of teaching in parables leaves the ambiguity unresolved. Did he teach this way in order to obscure or to reveal the mystery of the kingdom? Texts can be cited to support either point of view. What is clear is that those who did grasp the point of the parables gained insight into God's ways of working in our world.

Concluding Prayer

Solemn Blessing (Ordinary Time IV)

May the God of all consolation order our days in his peace
and grant us the gifts of his blessing.

Amen.

May he free us always from every distress
and confirm our hearts in his love.

Amen.

So that on this life's journey
we may be effective in good works,
rich in the gifts of hope, faith and charity,
and may come happily to eternal life.

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 IV, Roman Missal p. 716)