

SUNDAY READINGS

READ AT HOME

Twenty-Second Sunday in Ordinary Time

Year B

29 August 2021



Collect

God of might, giver of every good gift,
put into our hearts the love of your name,
so that, by deepening our sense of reverence,
you may nurture in us what is good
and, by your watchful care,
keep safe what you have nurtured.
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

Once upon a time it was a familiar catechism question. Is it a sin to miss Mass on Sunday? It's illuminating to turn the question on its head. Is it a sin to go to Mass on Sunday? This may seem a strange question but it's worth pondering. Some of today's readings suggest the answer could be yes.

Jesus quotes the prophet Isaiah to condemn worship that is just outward observance, worship that doesn't arise from true hearts. And the author of the letter of James defines pure religion not in terms of church-going but as "coming to the help of orphans and widows".

This is the constant danger that practising Christians face, the risk that the rituals of worship will substitute for living out the demands of the gospel for justice and mercy. The marriage of liturgy and justice is always in peril. Worship that does not fire our passion for justice is counterfeit; work for justice that does not impel us to the common table of word and sacrament may end in burnout.

A reading from the book of Deuteronomy

4:1–2, 6–8

Moses said to the people: 'Now, Israel, take notice of the laws and customs that I teach you today, and observe them, that you may have life and may enter and take possession of the land that the Lord the God of your fathers is giving you. You must add nothing to what I command you, and take nothing from it, but keep the commandments of the Lord your God just as I lay them down for you. Keep them, observe them, and they will demonstrate to the peoples your wisdom and understanding. When they come to know of all these laws they will exclaim, "No other people is as wise and prudent as this great nation." And indeed, what great nation is there that has its gods so near as the Lord our God that has laws and customs to match this whole Law that I put before you today?'

First Reading

As noted on Trinity Sunday, the book of Deuteronomy is the last of the five first books of the Bible known collectively as the Pentateuch. The title of the book comes from the Greek word for "second law-giving". Compiled over several centuries, it claims to present Moses' teaching on the laws (or words) given by God to shape the life of his chosen people Israel.

In this short extract from his first discourse Moses outlines the argument that will be expounded at length throughout the work. Observing the Law, he contends, has a twofold purpose. It will bring blessing to Israel and give witness to God before the nations.

In the first place the Law identifies Israel as God's chosen people, keeps them true to the covenant, and assures them of the fulfilment of God's promises. But there is more to it. Israel's observance of the Law becomes a gift to the whole world. Other peoples will be so impressed by Israel's wisdom and understanding that they will come to know the one true God. Keeping the Law will thus bear missionary witness to the world. This expansive view contrasts sharply with the narrow legalism of later times, as it is portrayed in the gospels.

The teaching that Moses gives in today's text is authoritative. The reading should therefore be proclaimed with strength and deliberation.

Responsorial Psalm

Ps 14:2–5

R. The just will live in the presence of the Lord.
Lord, who shall dwell on your holy mountain?
He who walks without fault;
he who acts with justice
and speaks the truth from his heart. R.
He who does no wrong to his brother,
who casts no slur on his neighbour,
who holds the godless in disdain,
but honours those who fear the Lord. R.
He who keeps his pledge, come what may;
who takes no interest on a loan
and accepts no bribes against the innocent.
Such a man will stand firm for ever. R.

Responsorial Psalm

The whole of Psalm 14/15 serves as the responsorial psalm for today. It is a short text that seems to have been associated with a rite of entry to the temple. Worshippers seeking admittance to the temple are faced with the question, who is worthy? The answer is spelt out clearly, starting with the response. It is the just who qualify to be "in the presence of the Lord".

The meaning of the term "the just" is expanded on in the body of the psalm. The just are those who speak the truth, who take no advantage of their neighbour, who are trustworthy and act with integrity. These statements echo the teaching of the prophets; true worship can only be offered by those who first put justice and compassion into practice. One cannot honour God unless one is already honouring one's neighbour.

This psalm may remind today's congregation of Jesus' advice to would-be worshippers in the Sermon on the Mount. If you remember that you are not at peace with your neighbour, then "leave your offering there before the altar, go and be reconciled with your brother first, and then come back and present your offering" (Mt 5:24).

Readers who wish to avoid the exclusively masculine language of the psalm may do so by changing the singular to the plural, but only after careful preparation.

A reading from the letter of St James

1:17–18, 21–22, 27

It is all that is good, everything that is perfect, which is given us from above; it comes down from the Father of all light; with him there is no such thing as alteration, no shadow of a change. By his own choice he made us his children by the message of the truth so that we should be a sort of first-fruits of all that he had created.

Accept and submit to the word which has been planted in you and can save your souls. But you must do what the word tells you, and not just listen to it and deceive yourselves.

Pure, unspoiled religion, in the eyes of God our Father is this: coming to the help of orphans and widows when they need it, and keeping oneself uncontaminated by the world.

A reading from the holy Gospel according to Mark

7:1–8, 14–15, 21–23

The Pharisees and some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem gathered round Jesus, and they noticed that some of his disciples were eating with unclean hands, that is, without washing them. For the Pharisees, and the Jews in general, follow the tradition of the elders and never eat without washing their arms as far as the elbow; and on returning from the market place they never eat without first sprinkling themselves. There are also many other observances which have been handed down to them concerning the washing of cups and pots and bronze dishes. So these Pharisees and scribes asked him, 'Why do your disciples not respect the tradition of the elders but eat their food with unclean hands?' He answered, 'It was of you hypocrites that Isaiah so rightly prophesied in this passage of scripture:

This people honours me only with lip-service,
while their hearts are far from me.

The worship they offer me is worthless,
the doctrines they teach are only human regulations.
You put aside the commandment of God
to cling to human traditions.'

He called the people to him again and said, 'Listen to me, all of you, and understand. Nothing that goes into a man from outside can make him unclean; it is the things that come out of a man that make him unclean. For it is from within, from men's hearts, that evil intentions emerge: fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, malice, deceit, indecency, envy, slander, pride, folly. All these things come from within and make a man unclean.'

Second Reading

Today we hear the first of five extracts from the letter of James. Scholarly opinion is divided as to the identity of the author. Tradition has attributed it to the person described in Galatians as James, the brother of Jesus (1:19), the leader of the Church in Jerusalem. Whether accurate or not, this fits in with the strongly Jewish character of the work.

It is called a letter but in fact is more like a practical moral exhortation written for a general Jewish-Christian readership. It draws heavily on the Old Testament and has much in common with Jewish wisdom literature. The author does not present a sustained argument or develop a theological thesis. The material consists of loosely connected issues; at times the writing is very forthright, even confrontational.

Today's passage is a combination of three separate texts from the first chapter. In the second sentence of the first section there seems to be implicit reference to Christian baptism in the phrase "made us his children by the message of the truth". This view is reinforced by the expression "a sort of first-fruits" which suggests baptismal themes of birth and re-creation.

The second section could then be seen as follow-up advice to the newly baptised. They are exhorted to heed "the word that has been planted in you" and to "do what the word tells you". This echoes Jesus' saying about those who hear the word and obey it (Luke 11:28). The third and final section is firmly in the tradition of Deuteronomy 24:17 which insists on care of the widow, the orphan and the stranger. The principal challenge for the reader is to engage the congregation right from the beginning where the language is more abstract and to hold their attention through to the more practical conclusion.

Gospel

Having read from the sixth chapter of John for the past five Sundays we return to today to Mark. We don't pick up where we left off because in the meantime we have heard John's version of Mark's material. Both evangelists report Jesus' feeding of the crowd, his walking on the stormy waters of the Sea of Galilee, and the crowd's pursuit of him. We reconnect with Mark where Jesus is in dispute with Pharisees and scribes from Jerusalem.

The issue in contention is the dietary and purity regime of the Mosaic Law. It is difficult to say how much Jesus himself may have engaged in this kind of argument. The debate may reflect subsequent hostility between the synagogue and the Christian way. Mark seems to have Gentile readers in mind with his unsympathetic description of Jewish purification practices.

By quoting Isaiah, Jesus identifies himself with the prophets who minced no words in exposing the hypocrisy of people who made a display of their religious observance while exploiting and oppressing the poor. The list of vices he cites has many parallels in the writings of the New Testament. His attribution of the source of these evil intentions to the human heart needs to be balanced with what Paul writes about the fruits of the Spirit e.g. Galatians 5:22-26. And his declaration that no food makes a person unclean anticipates Peter the apostle's vision in Acts 10:1-43 with all its missionary implications. Much of the passage is couched in negative terms but the real message is clearly positive. What Jesus exemplifies in himself and calls us to is complete integrity of life.

Concluding Prayer

Solemn Blessing (Ordinary Time I)

Bow down for the blessing.

May the Lord bless us and keep us.

Amen.

May he let his face shine upon us
and show us his mercy.

Amen.

May he turn his countenance towards us
and give us his peace.

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 I, Roman Missal p. 714)