

SUNDAY READINGS

READ AT HOME

St Mary of the Cross

Year B

8 August 2021



Collect

O God, source of all goodness,
who have shown us in Saint Mary
a woman of faith living by the power of the Cross,
teach us, we pray, by her example
to live the Gospel in changing times
and to respect and defend
the human dignity of all in our land.
Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son,
who lives and reigns with you in unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, for ever and ever.
Amen.

Readings and Commentaries

The story of Australia's first official saint, Mary MacKillop (1842-1909), is well known and easily accessed. Rather than re-tell it, let Mary speak to us in her own words:

Believe in the whisperings of God to your own heart. (1868)

Never see a need without doing something about it. (1871)

Be full of forgiveness, hope and love. (1873)

Try at least to excuse what you cannot understand and bear in mind that you have only to answer for your own faults. (1877)

Let us show love in our actions, bearing with one another, forgiving and forgetting. (1890)

Seek first the poorest and most neglected parts of God's vineyard ... (1900)

And finally, to her Sisters: *'Whatever troubles may be before you, accept them cheerfully, remembering whom you are trying to follow.*

Do not be afraid. Love one another, bear with one another, and let charity guide you in all your life'. (1909)

A reading from the first book of the Kings 17:8–16

And then the word of the Lord came to Elijah, 'Up and go to Zarephath, a Sidonian town, and stay there. I have ordered a widow there to give you food.' So he went off to Sidon. And when he reached the city gate, there was a widow gathering sticks; addressing her he said, 'Please bring a little water in a vessel for me to drink.' She was setting off to bring it when he called after her. 'Please' he said 'bring me a scrap of bread in your hand.' 'As the Lord your God lives,' she replied 'I have no baked bread, but only a handful of meal in a jar and a little oil in a jug; I am just gathering a stick or two to go and prepare this for myself and my son to eat, and then we shall die.' But Elijah said to her, 'Do not be afraid, go ahead and do as you have said; but first make a little scone of it for me and bring it to me, and then make some for yourself and your son. For thus the Lord speaks, the God of Israel:

"Jar of meal shall not be spent,
jug of oil shall not be emptied,
before the day when the Lord sends
rain on the face of the earth".

The woman went and did as Elijah told her and they ate the food, she, himself and her son. The jar of meal was not spent nor the jug of oil emptied, just as the Lord had foretold through Elijah.

Responsorial Psalm

Ps 62:1–8

R. My soul clings to you; your right hand holds me fast.

O God, you are my God, for you I long;
for you my soul is thirsting.
My body pines for you
like a dry, weary land without water. R.

So I gaze on you in the sanctuary
to see your strength and your glory.
For your love is better than life,
my lips will speak your praise. R.

So I will bless you all my life,
in your name I will lift up my hands.
My soul shall be filled as with a banquet,
my mouth shall praise you with joy. R.

On my bed I remember you.
On you I muse through the night
for you have been my help;
in the shadow of your wings I rejoice. R.

First Reading

The stories of the prophet Elijah and his successor Elisha in 1 and 2 Kings are colourful and engaging, and this one is no exception. The first two verses of the episode set the scene. Elijah heads off for the Sidonian town of Zarephath because the Lord has commanded him to. This is territory where the worship of Baal holds sway. It gives Elijah another opportunity to demonstrate the supremacy of Israel's God.

The outcome of the story is heartwarming, but first we must feel the plight of the widow whom Elijah seeks out. She has only the barest of rations, not enough to keep her and her son alive, yet this itinerant foreigner demands bread and water. In the event, she is impressed enough by Elijah's promise to take the risk of obeying him. Having put her faith in the prophet's word, she is blessed with an endless supply of flour and oil. A fitting story indeed for today's feast of a woman for whom trust in divine providence was a way of life.

Readers of this passage are fortunate to have such an appealing story to proclaim. There are four voices for the reader to adopt: those of the narrator, the widow, Elijah, and the Lord. It is a divine-human drama that should readily catch and hold the congregation's attention.

Responsorial Psalm

The widow of the first reading is not credited with explicit faith in the God of Israel. She lived in foreign territory and may have been a follower of Baal, but she exhibits the kind of trust that pervades the psalms. Psalm 62/63 is a good example of this, with its theme of heartfelt desire for God. It is the prayer of one who keeps vigil in the sanctuary in search of the divine presence. The part that we hear today (most of the psalm) is animated by a peaceful spirit of longing and trust.

The response, taken from the body of the psalm, invites us to imagine a child standing close by a parent and trustfully holding the parent's hand. The verses take us into a realm of confidence, gratitude and praise. They assure us that our desire for God will be fully satisfied. This the spirit in which they should be proclaimed.

Readers who seek out the full text of the psalm will see that the last few verses have been omitted. They express the psalmist's prayer for the downfall and destruction of enemies. Modern believers can struggle with these vengeful sentiments and texts like this have generally been censored from the lectionary. One wonders how Mary MacKillop, legendary for her tolerance and forgiveness, would have prayed them.

**A reading from the letter of St Paul
to the Colossians**

3:12-17

You are God's chosen race, his saints; he loves you and you should be clothed in sincere compassion, in kindness and humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with one another; forgive each other as soon as a quarrel begins. The Lord has forgiven you; now you must do the same. Over all these clothes, to keep them together and complete them, put on love. And may the peace of Christ reign in your hearts, because it is for this that you were called together as parts of one body. Always be thankful. Let the message of Christ, in all its richness, find a home with you. Teach each other, and advise each other, in all wisdom. With gratitude in your hearts sing psalms and hymns and inspired songs to God; and never say or do anything except in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

**A reading from the holy Gospel
according to Matthew**

6:25-34

Jesus said to his disciples:
I am telling you not to worry about your life and what you are to eat,
nor about your body and how you are to clothe it.
Surely life means more than food, and the body more than clothing!
Look at the birds in the sky.
They do not sow or reap or gather into barns;
yet your heavenly Father feeds them.
Are you not worth much more than they are?
Can any of you, for all his worrying,
add one single cubit to his span of life?
And why worry about clothing?
Think of the flowers growing in the fields;
they never have to work or spin;
yet I assure you that not even Solomon in all his regalia
was robed like one of these.
Now if that is how God clothes the grass in the field
which is there today and thrown into the furnace
tomorrow,
will he not much more look after you, you men of little
faith?
So do not worry; do not say, "What are we to eat?
What are we to drink? How are we to be clothed?"
It is the pagans who set their hearts on all these things.
Your heavenly Father knows you need them all.
Set your hearts on his kingdom first, and on his
righteousness,
and all these other things will be given you as well.
So do not worry about tomorrow; tomorrow will take care
of itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.'

Second Reading

In the lectionary the letter to the Colossians remains attributed to Paul, though many scholars argue that it was written by a later disciple. This claim is made for other letters too, such as Ephesians. It is therefore hard to be sure exactly where and when Colossians was written. All that is known about the Christian community at Colossae is what can be deduced from the letter.

The letter is short by Pauline standards – just four chapters. The extract we have today comes from the latter part of the letter which offers instruction for the whole community on Christian living.

The author establishes beautiful and high ideals for the members to put into practice, but always in the context of the love shown us by God in Christ: "You are God's chosen race . . . he loves you"; "The Lord has forgiven you"; "may the peace of Christ reign in your hearts"; "Let the message of Christ . . . find a home with you". In brief all Christian living is inspired and made possible by the grace of God.

The reader's task here is to proclaim these ideals so positively that everyone in the congregation is moved to say their own silent but heartfelt "Yes!" They are not being badgered by a litany of impossible demands but invited to consent to an unconditional offer of love.

Gospel

We might not be surprised that the gospel text for the feast of Mary MacKillop comes from the Sermon on the Mount. But the passage chosen, like Mary's life, poses a question we'd rather avoid. In what do we place our trust? Is it material things (money, food, clothing) or is it the God who unfailingly cares for all? Where does our heart lie? Is our heart set on what we possess or on the reign of God?

The passage as a whole is framed by two statements of Jesus. The first is: "You cannot be the slave both of God and of money." The second is: "Set your hearts on his kingdom first, and on his righteousness, and all these other things will be given you as well." In between, Jesus offers engaging images and speaks in conversational terms.

Readers have a two-fold challenge on their hands with this text. The first is to hold the congregation's attention throughout a reading that may be all too familiar. The second is to deliver it with enough appeal to be able to bypass the entrenched defences of people for whom material cares are the stuff of daily living. Not an easy task!

The final verse should not be given much emphasis; it seems to be an independent saying that has become attached here by word association.

Concluding Prayer

Solemn Blessing (Mary of the Cross)

Through the example of Saint Mary of the Cross,
may we learn to recognise God's will for us
and trust in his providence.

Amen.

May her life of service awaken in us
a deep respect for the poor
and a strong will for justice.

Amen.

May we share in her courage,
see with the eyes of Christian love,
and learn from her holy deeds.

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 Mary of the Cross, Roman Missal p. 971)