

SUNDAY READINGS

READ AT HOME

Twenty-Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Year B

19 September 2021



Collect

O God, who founded all the commands of your sacred Law upon love of you and of our neighbour, grant that, by keeping your precepts, we may merit to attain eternal life. 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

For a hand-picked inner circle of disciples, the Twelve prove to be remarkably dull and slow. As Mark tells it, they fail again and again to grasp who Jesus really was and what he was about. Jesus rebukes them repeatedly for being so thick-headed. If the story of the washing of the feet were in Mark's gospel rather than John's, there's no doubt that the disciples would have had to say "No" when asked by Jesus: "Do you understand what I have done to you?"

There's no reply recorded in John. Instead, Jesus proceeds to explain the meaning of his gesture. "If I, then, your Lord and Master, have washed your feet, you should wash each other's feet. I have given you an example so that you may copy what I have done to you."

This is not what the disciples had in mind when they argued with each other on the road about who was the greatest. Our lust for power may not be as blatant as it was among the Twelve. Perhaps we are cleverer at disguising it. But few of us are free of its grip. Today, if we allow it, the word of God that is "sharper than any two-edged sword" can lay bare "the thoughts and intentions of the heart" (Heb 4:12). It can also inspire us to be "last of all and servant of all".

A reading from the book of Wisdom 2:12, 17–20

The godless say to themselves,
'Let us lie in wait for the virtuous man, since he annoys
us and opposes our way of life,
reproaches us for our breaches of the law
and accuses us of playing false to our upbringing.
Let us see if what he says is true,
let us observe what kind of end he himself will have.
If the virtuous man is God's son, God will take his
part and rescue him from the clutches of his enemies.
Let us test him with cruelty and with torture,
and thus explore this gentleness of his
and put his endurance to the proof.
Let us condemn him to a shameful death
since he will be looked after - we have his word for
it.'

First Reading

For a brief introduction to the book of Wisdom please refer back to the 13th Sunday of Ordinary Time. Today's passage about the provocation given to the ungodly by the example of a virtuous person is closely related to the text we hear from the prophet Isaiah (52:13 – 53:12) on Good Friday. That reading describes at length the suffering of the innocent servant of the Lord and his ultimate vindication.

This fourth servant song has been adapted by the author of Wisdom to become an exposé of the inner thoughts and evil intentions of the ungodly. It has the ring of psychological truth about it. Readers and congregations alike may readily admit the resentment we can feel when another person brings our hidden and shameful desires to light. Resentment can boil over into anger, and anger can erupt in violence, even if verbal rather than physical. The dynamic is the same.

The reading therefore presents an unusual challenge. After the opening phrase, the entire reading is in the form of the inner voice of the wicked. In effect, the reader is cast in the role of villain. This calls for a tone of voice that conveys the callous and calculating mindset of the evildoer without becoming over-theatrical.

It is all the more important that the reader pauses before launching into the reading. Only when the congregation is clearly attentive should the reader begin, because the short first phrase – “The godless say to themselves” – is the key to everything that follows.

Responsorial Psalm Ps 53:3–6, 8

R. The Lord upholds my life.

○ God, save me by your name;
by your power, uphold my cause.

○ God, hear my prayer;
listen to the words of my mouth. R.

For proud men have risen against me,
ruthless men seek my life.

They have no regard for God. R.

But I have God for my help.

The Lord upholds my life.

I will sacrifice to you with willing heart
and praise your name for it is good. R.

Responsorial Psalm

Understandably the responsorial psalm follows on from the first reading as a prayer for support in the face of persecution. Psalm 53/54 is quite brief. Most of it has found its way into the responsorial psalm, except for a couple of sentences in which the psalmist seeks the extinction of his enemies. The compilers of the lectionary have chosen not to include those parts of psalms which wish violent vengeance upon enemies.

Like the psalm itself, the response is short, very short in fact. There is a risk that it will be reduced to a word-bite. Readers will need to cue congregations in to pray it slowly enough for the meaning to take hold. They will also need to take care with the second verse because it has only three lines.

Readers who prepare carefully will note that in some parts of the psalm God is addressed directly, while in other parts God is spoken of in the third person. This may be a little disconcerting, especially in the third verse where there is a sudden switch. A moment's pause at the point of transition would be useful.

A reading from the first letter of St James

3:16 – 4:3

Wherever you find jealousy and ambition, you find disharmony, and wicked things of every kind being done; whereas the wisdom that comes down from above is essentially something pure; it also makes for peace, and is kindly and considerate; it is full of compassion and shows itself by doing good; nor is there any trace of partiality or hypocrisy in it.

Peacemakers, when they work for peace, sow the seeds which will bear fruit in holiness.

Where do these wars and battles between yourselves first start? Isn't it precisely in the desires fighting inside your own selves? You want something and you haven't got it; so you are prepared to kill. You have an ambition that you cannot satisfy; so you fight to get your way by force. Why you don't have what you want is because you don't pray for it; when you do pray and don't get it, it is because you have not prayed properly, you have prayed for something to indulge your own desires.

A reading from the holy Gospel according to Mark

9:30–37

After leaving the mountain Jesus and his disciples made their way through Galilee; and he did not want anyone to know, because he was instructing his disciples; he was telling them, 'The Son of Man will be delivered into the hands of men; they will put him to death; and three days after he has been put to death he will rise again.' But they did not understand what he said and were afraid to ask him.

They came to Capernaum, and when he was in the house he asked them, 'What were you arguing about on the road?' They said nothing because they had been arguing which of them was the greatest. So he sat down, called the Twelve to him and said, 'If anyone wants to be first, he must make himself last of all and servant of all.' He then took a little child, set him in front of them, put his arms round him, and said to them, 'Anyone who welcomes one of these little children in my name, welcomes me; and anyone who welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.'

Second Reading

As we've come to expect, today's excerpt from James is blunt and uncompromising. He compares worldly wisdom with the divine wisdom that is offered to us. His description of true wisdom has echoes of the description given in the book of Wisdom (7:22 – 8:1) as well as Paul's account of what the Spirit brings: "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, trustfulness, gentleness and self-control" (Gal 5:22).

What James has to say about wrong desires makes a connection with the first reading and the gospel: "You want something . . . so you are prepared to kill. You have an ambition . . . so you fight to get your way by force".

The reading as a whole is a play of light and shadow. It opens with the darkness of conflict and moves to the light that is shed by the "wisdom from above". It switches back to the murky world of false and violent passion before finishing with an unspoken hint of the light that would be shed if only we prayed properly.

This is a rather argumentative text. It would be easy to get caught up in the strength of its emotion. This suggests that it would be good for readers to highlight the positive section on the fruits of true wisdom. This calls for a slower and more thoughtful delivery.

Gospel

At this point the lectionary omits the story of the transfiguration, presumably because we hear it every year on the Second Sunday of Lent. It also leaves out the story of the exorcism that follows. Curiously this episode has been completely omitted from the three-year Sunday cycle, even though it is recorded in each of the synoptic gospels.

Today's gospel text begins with verse 30 but not before the lectionary inserts a phrase adapted from verse 9. This connects the reading with the transfiguration: "After leaving the mountain . . ." Jesus attempts to instruct his disciples about his true identity and impending fate, but typically "they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him".

Perhaps they did understand all too well, for it immediately becomes evident that the disciples are ambitious for power and glory, not humiliation and suffering. Jesus' teaching is unambiguous. The disciples are to devote themselves to service, not aggrandisement. As the gospel now reads, the child becomes the symbol of those who have no favours to grant in return for being paid attention.

The reading is a dynamic combination of action and dialogue. What Jesus has to say is serious and should be delivered accordingly.

Concluding Prayer

Solemn Blessing (Ordinary Time IV)

Bow down for the blessing.

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.

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)