

SUNDAY READINGS

READ AT HOME

Twenty-Seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time

Year B

3 October 2021



Collect

Almighty ever-living God,
who in the abundance of your kindness
surpass the merits and the desires of those who entreat you,
pour out your mercy upon us
to pardon what conscience dreads
and to give what prayer does not dare to ask.
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

How to uphold the divine purpose of marriage as an unconditional, life-long and fruitful union of body, mind and heart in the face of the failure of so many marriages is a pastoral challenge of enormous importance for the Church. Marriage life is an arena in which the tension between the radical demands of the gospel and the reality of human frailty is most acutely felt.

There are no simple or easy answers. In fact the questions multiply. What light does the gospel shed on family planning, on parenting, on same-sex relationships, on extra-marital relationships, and on divorce, remarriage and communion, not to mention the emerging bioethical issues around the creation of human life?

However great the challenges, we must never lose sight of the fact that the teaching of Jesus is good news. He himself is “of the same stock” as ourselves (Heb 2:11) ; he knows our weaknesses because he “has been tempted in every way that we are” (4:15). The author has wise advice for us: “Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need” (4:16).

A reading from the book of Genesis 2:18–24

The Lord God said, 'It is not good that the man should be alone. I will make him a helpmate.' So from the soil the Lord God fashioned all the wild beasts and all the birds of heaven. These he brought to the man to see what he would call them; each one was to bear the name the man would give it. The man gave names to all the cattle, all the birds of heaven and all the wild beasts. But no helpmate suitable for man was found for him. So the Lord God made the man fall into a deep sleep. And while he slept, he took one of his ribs and enclosed it in flesh. The Lord God built the rib he had taken from the man into a woman, and brought her to the man. The man exclaimed:

'This at last is bone from my bones
and flesh from my flesh!
This is to be called woman,
for this was taken from man.'

This is why a man leaves his father and mother and joins himself to his wife, and they become one body.

First Reading

The second creation story (Gen 2:4-25) is quite different from the majestic litany of the first story that is read at the Easter Vigil. It focuses much more on the coming-to-be of the man, followed by the woman, and on their human experience.

Like all the stories in the first eleven chapters of Genesis that wrestle with fundamental questions about human existence, this one offers food for thought rather than neat answers. God is said to recognise the need of the first human being to have a "helpmate". Although the man has been fashioned from the soil, none of the other creatures formed from the same raw material satisfy his need. His companion ultimately must originate from the man's own flesh and blood. In time the separation of the woman from the man's body is reversed in their sexual union.

On the face of it the story is patriarchal in character. As well as affirming human authority over all other creatures (shown by the naming), it implies that man has priority over woman. He is the primary and active character in the story, the woman is secondary and passive. All the same it affirms their fundamental identity. It's a pity that the compilers of the lectionary have omitted the concluding verse of the story: "Now both of them were naked, the man and his wife, but they felt no shame in front of each other."

Ancient and familiar as it is, the story still captures our imaginations. It is simply and vividly told, weaving action and dialogue together in an appealing combination. Readers who have a feel for the pathos of the passage will proclaim it well.

Responsorial Psalm

Ps 127

R. May the Lord bless us
all the days of our lives.

O blessed are those who fear the Lord
and walk in his ways!
by the labour of your hands you shall eat.
You will be happy and prosper. R.

Your wife will be like a fruitful vine
in the heart of your house;
your children like shoots of the olive,
around your table. R.

Indeed thus shall be blessed
the man who fears the Lord.
May the Lord bless you from Zion
in a happy Jerusalem
all the days of your life!
May you see your children's children.
On Israel, peace! R.

Responsorial Psalm

Psalm 127/128 is one of the short psalms called the "Songs of Ascents" because of their possible use by pilgrims on their way up to the temple. They recount the blessings that come from living in obedience to the Lord – a happy family life at home and peace and prosperity in the land.

Today the whole of the psalm is prayed. It is offered from a male perspective, for it is "the man who fears the Lord" who will be blessed with wife and children and with the fruit of his labours.

Most of the lines in the verses are quite short; readers need to be careful not to run on to the next line too quickly. They will also need to give special attention to the last verse; with seven lines it is unusually long. The right intonation and a simple glance (and certainly not prompting with the word "Response") should give the congregation the cue it needs to join in at the right moment. The psalm finishes joyfully with a short series of prayerful blessings.

A reading from the letter to the Hebrews 2:9–11

We see in Jesus one who was for a short while made lower than the angels and is now crowned with glory and splendour because he submitted to death; by God's grace he had to experience death for all mankind.

As it was his purpose to bring a great many of his sons into glory, it was appropriate that God, for whom everything exists and through whom everything exists, should make perfect, through suffering, the leader who would take them to their salvation. For the one who sanctifies, and the ones who are sanctified, are of the same stock; that is why he openly calls them brothers.

A reading from the holy Gospel according to Mark

10:2–16

Some Pharisees approached Jesus and asked, 'Is it against the law for a man to divorce his wife?' They were testing him. He answered them, 'What did Moses command you?' 'Moses allowed us' they said 'to draw up a writ of dismissal and so to divorce.' Then Jesus said to them, 'It was because you were so unteachable that he wrote this commandment for you. But from the beginning of creation God made them male and female. This is why a man must leave father and mother, and the two become one body. They are no longer two, therefore, but one body. So then, what God has united, man must not divide.' Back in the house the disciples questioned him again about this, and he said to them. 'The man who divorces his wife and marries another is guilty of adultery against her. And if a woman divorces her husband and marries another she is guilty of adultery too.'

[People were bringing little children to him, for him to touch them. The disciples turned them away, but when Jesus saw this he was indignant and said to them, 'Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. I tell you solemnly, anyone who does not welcome the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.' Then he put his arms round them, laid his hands on them and gave them his blessing.]

Second Reading

This is the first of seven readings from Chapters 2–10 of the letter to the Hebrews that take us up to the last Sunday of the liturgical year. We hear from Chapter 1 each Christmas Day and from Chapters 11 and 12 in Year C.

There is much about the letter to the Hebrews that even today remains unclear: who the author was, for whom the letter was written, and where and when it was composed. There is no doubt, however, that its literary style is the most sophisticated in the New Testament.

The letter (really an exhortation) has all the rhetorical flourish of an orator in full flight. Its overall purpose is clear – to argue that Jesus Christ is uniquely human and divine and has once and for all won free access to God for faithful believers – but its argumentation is complex. The author draws heavily on both Jewish scripture and Greek philosophy to make his case. It's a challenging text for readers and congregations alike.

In today's passage the author argues for the humanity of Jesus. This will form the basis for his thesis that Jesus is the perfect high priest whose sacrificial death and resurrection have brought the old system of worship to an end. Readers will need to prepare this carefully. The sentences are long and elaborate. It is essential that readers can clearly identify the phrases that are key assertions as distinct from those which have been added as explanation and commentary. The layout of the NRSV text may help in this exercise. The proclamation needs to be slow and deliberate enough for the congregation to be able to follow and understand the author's line of thought.

Gospel

Today's gospel has a shorter and a longer form. The full text is made up of two parts which do not appear to have any direct connection with each other. The first is about marriage and divorce, the second about welcoming the kingdom like a child. The shorter version omits this second part.

The section on marriage may itself be divided in two. In the first part Jesus is engaged in public argument with the Pharisees, in the second he answers his disciples in private. In response to the Pharisees' question Jesus quotes from the second creation story in Genesis to reaffirm God's original intention that marriage be a life-long commitment. In contrast with other New Testament writers (see Mt 5:32, 1 Cor 7:10-16), Mark makes no reference to any exceptions to this norm.

Jesus' teaching provokes the disciples to seek clarification. His reply remains absolute but is remarkable for the way it puts husband and wife on an equal footing. The question of how to interpret and apply Jesus' teaching in our time is challenging and controversial.

The second part of the reading develops what was said two Sundays ago when Jesus identified himself with a little child. This time he insists that we will need to become as little children if we are to receive the gift of the kingdom. Jesus offers no explanation as to why it is "to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs." We are left to imagine this for ourselves. It is worth noting that Jesus was angry ("indignant") with his disciples for not wanting to be bothered by the children.

[Short Form: omit text in brackets.]

Concluding Prayer

Solemn Blessing (Ordinary Time VI)

Bow down for the blessing.

May God bless us with every heavenly blessing,
make us always holy and pure in his sight,
pour out in abundance upon us the riches of his glory,
and teach us with the words of truth;
may he instruct us in the Gospel of salvation,
and ever endow us with fraternal charity.
Through Christ our Lord.

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 VI, Roman Missal p. 717)