

SUNDAY READINGS

READ AT HOME

Twenty-Ninth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Year B

17 October 2021



Collect

Almighty ever-living God,
grant that we may always conform our will to yours
and serve your majesty in sincerity of heart.
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

Anyone who reads the gospel of Mark thoughtfully will be struck by the paradox it presents. On the one hand we encounter Jesus as a figure of immense power: he rebukes demons, calms the sea, and teaches with astonishing authority. On the other he steadfastly renounces the use of power. He calls himself a servant and insists that his disciples make themselves slaves to all.

We see in Jesus that being a servant does not mean being weak and ineffectual. That is something Jesus never was. He impressed people time and again with his authority, because he never sought power over others. Being so free, so centred, and so attuned to the power of love, he could put all his capacities at the service of others' well-being.

Gustavo Gutierrez put it this way: "Serving does not mean that we passively accept that things continue as they are. Serving implies initiative and creativity, knowledge and efforts, to build a human, just and loving world" (*Sharing the Word through the Liturgical Year*).

A reading from the prophet Isaiah 53:10–11

The Lord has been pleased to crush his servant with suffering.

If he offers his life in atonement,
he shall see his heirs, he shall have a long life
and through him what the Lord wishes will be done.

His soul's anguish over
he shall see the light and be content.
By his sufferings shall my servant justify many,
taking their faults on himself.

First Reading

This passage is a very short extract from the concluding section of the fourth song of the suffering servant in Isaiah (52:13 – 53:12). We hear it in full on Good Friday afternoon. As is often the case with the Old Testament reading, lack of context makes it difficult for a congregation to pick up the thread of the passage. This makes the first sentence of today's reading all the more disconcerting: "The Lord has been pleased to crush his servant with suffering." No wonder the NRSV lectionary has inserted an earlier verse to address this problem.

The meaning of the four songs is disputed. The figure of the servant is mysterious; it could be an individual person or it could be Israel as a people. The songs suggest that this servant has been chosen by God for a mission that will entail opposition and suffering but will bring vindication. The liturgies of Holy Week draw clear parallels between the mission of Isaiah's servant figure and the redemptive suffering and death of Jesus. In today's gospel Jesus himself appears to use the fourth song to teach his disciples about his servant-like life and death.

Because the reading is brief and starts so bluntly, it is all the more important that readers do not begin until they are sure they have the congregation's full attention. The nature of the text calls for a tone of voice that conveys the pathos and import of the passage.

Responsorial Psalm Ps 32:4–5, 18–20, 22

R. Lord, let your mercy be on us,
as we place our trust in you.

The word of the Lord is faithful
and all his works to be trusted.
The Lord loves justice and right
and fills the earth with his love. R.

The Lord looks on those who revere him,
on those who hope in his love,
to rescue their souls from death,
to keep them alive in famine. R.

Our soul is waiting for the Lord.
The Lord is our help and our shield.
May your love be upon us, O Lord,
as we place all our hope in you. R.

Responsorial Psalm

Psalm 32/33 is a joyful song of praise to God as Creator and as Lord of history; in the course of the three-year cycle it appears on a number of Sundays in Lent, Easter and Ordinary Time.

The response is adapted from the very last lines of the psalm. Being in the plural it suggests that we imagine Isaiah's suffering servant to be the representative of the whole people.

The verses form a confession of faith in God as redeemer, leading to the confident prayer of the final two lines. The phrase "to rescue their souls from death" has special resonance in the light of the first reading and gospel. The tone of the whole psalm is one of joy, faith and gratitude. The language is clear and simple, and the verses are all in four short lines. The reader should be able to proclaim them with assurance.

A reading from the letter to the Hebrews 4:4–16

Since in Jesus, the Son of God, we have the supreme high priest who has gone through to the highest heaven, we must never let go of the faith that we have professed. For it is not as if we had a high priest who was incapable of feeling our weaknesses with us; but we have one who has been tempted in every way that we are, though he is without sin. Let us be confident, then, in approaching the throne of grace, that we shall have mercy from him and find grace when we are in need of help.

A reading from the holy Gospel according to Mark

10:35–45

[James and John, the sons of Zebedee, approached Jesus. 'Master,' they said to him 'we want you to do us a favour.' He said to them, 'What is it you want me to do for you?' They said to him, 'Allow us to sit one at your right hand and the other at your left in your glory.' 'You do not know what you are asking' Jesus said to them. 'Can you drink the cup that I must drink, or be baptised with the baptism with which I must be baptised?' They replied, 'We can.' Jesus said to them, 'The cup that I must drink you shall drink, and with the baptism with which I must be baptised you shall be baptised, but as for seats at my right hand or my left, these are not mine to grant; they belong to those to whom they have been allotted.'

When the other ten heard this they began to feel indignant with James and John, so] Jesus called them to him and said to them, 'You know that among the pagans their so-called rulers lord it over them, and their great men make their authority felt. This is not to happen among you. No; anyone who wants to become great among you must be your servant, and anyone who wants to be first among you must be slave to all. For the Son of Man himself did not come to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.'

[Short Form: omit text in brackets.]

Second Reading

It seems that the letter to the Hebrews was written to encourage a community that had endured hardship and was in danger of losing heart. This is borne out by passages like today's. The recipients are exhorted to "never let go of the faith we have professed". They may be "in need of help" but can be confident in finding grace and mercy, because they have "a high priest . . . who has been tempted in every way that we are". This last phrase is a very strong affirmation of Jesus' humanity, a recurring theme of the letter. This equips him to be an effective intercessor for us.

The writer assumes that his readers are well informed about Jewish ritual practice. Here there is allusion to the liturgy of the Day of Atonement. On that day the high priest alone entered the holy of holies where the Ark of the Covenant lay, covered by the mercy seat, bringing with him the blood of the sin offering to make atonement for the people. By contrast Christian believers are all free to approach the "throne of grace" and to do so with confidence.

Readers should aim to convey the encouragement that the author intended. The passage should be read with warmth and assurance.

Gospel

For the third week in a row there is the option of a shorter gospel text. Given the brevity of the first two readings, and the fact that the longer gospel is by no means excessive in length, it would seem a pity to set it aside. This is especially the case as the part that is omitted from the shortened version sets the scene for what follows. In fact even the preceding verses – 10:32-34 – are pertinent because they record the third warning Jesus gives of his impending fate.

In spite of that teaching James and John make a brazen request that goes completely counter to what Jesus has just said. He does not rebuke them brusquely as he did Peter earlier in the gospel. Instead he invites them to consider what they are asking, using familiar Old Testament images of trial and suffering (the cup and baptism) to alert them to the consequences. They, like Peter, answer impetuously but are not rebuffed. Tradition has it that James in fact was martyred (Acts 12:2).

The sequel to this conversation reveals that the other ten harbour similar ambitions. This gives Jesus another opportunity to try and get them to understand the true nature of his messiahship. The passage concludes with a verse that still generates animated debate: ". . . the Son of Man himself did not come to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many".

Scholars disagree on how closely this saying is linked with the fourth song of the suffering servant in Isaiah, but the lectionary makes the connection explicit. What we have heard in the short first reading is repeated in the song's closing lines: ". . . he was bearing the faults of many and praying all the time for sinners".

Concluding Prayer

Solemn Blessing (Ordinary Time II)

Bow down for the blessing.

May the peace of God,
which surpasses all understanding,
keep our hearts and minds
in the knowledge and love of God,
and of his Son, our Lord Jesus Christ.

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 II, Roman Missal p. 715)