

SUNDAY READINGS

READ AT HOME

Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Year B

14 February 2021



Collect

O God, who teach us that you abide
in hearts that are just and true,
grant that we may be so fashioned by your grace
as to become a dwelling pleasing to you.
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

Most of us at some time in our lives know the pain of being excluded, shut out, cut off. We feel the hurt deep inside. The wish to belong is one of the most powerful human desires. Alone we can wither and die. No wonder that belonging is a central theme in the Judaeo-Christian scriptures. It is an especially vivid feature of the ministry of Jesus. He is constantly welcoming, inclusive and hospitable.

The tragic irony is that his open-hearted acceptance of all people, especially those who had been cast aside by either secular or religious authorities, led to his own exclusion and execution. Today we hear how Jesus is prepared to exchange places with an outcast. The leper he touches and cures is free to take his place in society while Jesus is forced to move out to uninhabited territory.

Jesus' eventual death outside the city breaks down the barriers that keep us apart. We are true disciples of his to the extent that we do everything that we can to welcome all to the table of life.

A reading from the book of Leviticus 13:1–2, 44–46

The Lord said to Moses and Aaron, 'If a swelling or scab or shiny spot appears on a man's skin, a case of leprosy of the skin is to be suspected. The man must be taken to Aaron, the priest, or to one of the priests who are his sons.

'The man is leprosy: he is unclean. The priest must declare him unclean; he is suffering from leprosy of the head. A man infected with leprosy must wear his clothing torn and his hair disordered; he must shield his upper lip and cry, "Unclean, unclean." As long as the disease lasts he must be unclean; and therefore he must live apart; he must live outside the camp.'

First Reading

Two lengthy chapters in Leviticus are devoted to the issue of skin diseases (generally but misleadingly called "leprosy"). These conditions were considered to make a person ritually unclean, so detailed prescriptions were laid down to enable the afflicted person to regain ritual purity.

Today's reading combines two short texts from Chapter 13. The first establishes the rule that anyone on whom signs of skin infection appear must submit to examination by one of the priests. The second spells out the primary consequence of being declared unclean – excommunication or social isolation.

Congregations may be taken aback when they find that the Lord's word to Moses and Aaron is about scabs and spotty skin. Readers may even find it distasteful to have to proclaim such a text. It will help if they recognise that what lies behind these sanitary regulations is the issue of identity. These provisions are but one facet of the traditions that defined Israel as God's covenant people.

Apart from the subject matter, the principal challenge for the reader is the rather awkward transition between the two parts of the reading because a long section of the chapter has been omitted. The suspected condition is suddenly taken as confirmed, and is identified as "leprosy of the head".

Readers – and perhaps the congregation – will be aware that this text has been chosen to lead into the gospel story of Jesus' cure of the leper.

Responsorial Psalm

Ps 31:1–2, 5, 11

R. I turn to you, Lord, in time of trouble,
and you fill me with the joy of salvation.

Happy the man whose offence is forgiven,
whose sin is remitted.

○ happy the man to whom the Lord
imputes no guilt,
in whose spirit is no guile. **R.**

But now I have acknowledged my sins;
my guilt I did not hide.

I said: 'I will confess
my offence to the Lord.'

And you, Lord, have forgiven
the guilt of my sin. **R.**

Rejoice, rejoice in the Lord,
exult, you just!

○ come, ring out your joy,
all you upright of heart. **R.**

Responsorial Psalm

Psalm 31/32 is commonly identified as one of seven psalms that the early Christian Church named "penitential". It's a song of thanksgiving from one who has experienced God's forgiveness of sin.

One might question the choice of this psalm for today. Its focus on sin, guilt and forgiveness seems to imply that the skin diseases dealt with in the first reading are to be identified with sin. While Jesus seems to acknowledge an inter-connection between sickness and sin (Mk 2:5 and Jn 5:14), nowhere does he simply equate them; in one place at least he explicitly denies such a link (Jn 9:2). At the very least the relation between sickness and sin is a complex one.

Readers will see that the given response is not short and simple. It extends over two lines, and the first line is divided in the middle by the address to the Lord. This presents a double challenge. The response needs to be announced in such a way that the congregation neither repeats the first line prematurely nor has lost track of the whole unit by the time it is due to respond.

The response should therefore be proclaimed clearly and slowly, with an upward inflection at the end of the first line to discourage the congregation from joining in too soon. It may be necessary for the reader to repeat the response with the congregation the first time round.

The verses themselves are straightforward enough, though care should be taken not to rush the short lines of the third verse. The text could be rendered inclusive by replacing "man" with "one".

**A reading from the first letter of St Paul
to the Corinthians 10:31 – 11:1**

Whatever you eat, whatever you drink, whatever you do at all, do it for the glory of God. Never do anything offensive to anyone - to Jews or Greeks or to the Church of God; just as I try to be helpful to everyone at all times, not anxious for my own advantage but for the advantage of everybody else, so that they may be saved.

Take me for your model, as I take Christ.

**A reading from the holy Gospel
according to Mark 1:40–45**

A leper came to Jesus and pleaded on his knees: 'If you want to' he said 'you can cure me.' Feeling sorry for him, Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him. 'Of course I want to!' he said. 'Be cured!' And the leprosy left him at once and he was cured. Jesus immediately sent him away and sternly ordered him, 'Mind you say nothing to anyone, but go and show yourself to the priest, and make the offering for your healing prescribed by Moses as evidence of your recovery.' The man went away, but then started talking about it freely and telling the story everywhere, so that Jesus could no longer go openly into any town, but had to stay outside in places where nobody lived. Even so, people from all around would come to him.

Second Reading

Today's short extract from 1 Corinthians is unfortunately deprived of its context. These few verses bring to conclusion Paul's lengthy consideration of an issue troubling the community, namely, whether Christians could in good conscience eat meat bought from the markets after it had been offered to pagan gods. It is worth noting that the text in the NRSV lectionary inserts several of the preceding verses to try and put Paul's advice in its proper perspective.

The broader context is that of table fellowship in the ancient world and within Christian communities in particular. Who one ate with and what one ate were matters of great social importance – witness the price Jesus paid for his indiscriminate dining. In principle Paul wants to argue that Christians are free from the burden of dietary regulations but are not free to discriminate in their table fellowship between rich and poor or between Jewish and Gentile Christians.

But the freedom that Christians enjoy, Paul warns, is not absolute; it must be exercised with respect for those whose consciences are still weak and troubled. All must be done for the glory of God and for the salvation of others. In spite of being cast adrift from Paul's larger argument, the reading delivers a clear message in plain language. Since it is a short text, readers need to be sure they have the congregation's full attention before they proceed with it.

Gospel

Much of the first chapter of Mark's gospel is found also in Luke; the story of the cure of the leper is found also in Matthew. The affliction suffered by lepers in Jesus' day was three-fold. In the first place there was the disease itself; secondly the social isolation; and thirdly the religious stigma of being unclean. Jesus is mindful of the leper's whole predicament. The phrase "feeling sorry for him" does no justice to the depth of feeling, perhaps even of anger, that the original Greek implies. Having cured his physical ailment, Jesus directs the man to go without delay to the priest in order to be restored to his place in the community. Jesus' command of silence may have been purely a practical directive, but it links in with other texts in Mark where Jesus imposes a ban on publicity about himself – in this case to no effect. The logic behind this prohibition seems to be Jesus' desire not to be misunderstood and misrepresented simply as a wonder-worker. Mark's intent is to show Jesus to be a figure of contradiction – a crucified Messiah. Perhaps the comment that Jesus "could no longer go openly into any town" is already a hint of the fate that will befall him in the end, to be crucified outside the city. Certainly for the time being Jesus exchanges places with the leper, having "to stay outside in places where nobody lived".

Concluding Prayer

Solemn Blessing (Ordinary Time III)

May almighty God bless us in his kindness
and pour out saving wisdom upon us.

Amen.

May he nourish us always with the teachings of the faith
and make us persevere in holy deeds.

Amen.

May he turn our steps towards himself
and show us the path of charity and 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 III, Roman Missal p. 714)