

SUNDAY READINGS

READ AT HOME

Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Year B

7 February 2021



Collect

Keep your family safe, O Lord, with unfailing care,
that, relying solely on the hope of heavenly grace,
they may be defended always by your protection.
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

Our lives these days are governed by many calendars – the school or university calendar, the sporting calendar and the calendar of the seasons, to name but a few. The liturgical calendar – the Church's annual cycle of seasons and celebrations – has plenty of competition. This part of Ordinary Time may struggle to stay on our radar. Not only is it sandwiched between the seasons of Christmas and Lent, but it is prone to being overshadowed by the end of summer holidays and the resumption of the school and working year.

To add to the challenge, today's combination of readings is rather awkward. Before we get to the appealing text of the gospel we listen to a lament from Job, pray a cheerful psalm, and hear some self-justifying bluster from Paul. In the circumstances what may strike us most is the commanding figure of Jesus, preaching and healing with impressive authority. Mark would be happy for us to see the power of God at work in this itinerant preacher.

A reading from the prophet Job

7:1–4, 6–7

First Reading

Job began to speak:

Is not man's life on earth nothing more
than pressed service,
his time no better than hired drudgery?
Like the slave, sighing for the shade,
or the workman with no thought but his wages,
months of delusion I have assigned to me,
nothing for my own but nights of grief.
Lying in bed I wonder, 'When will it be day?'
Risen I think, 'How slowly evening comes!'
Restlessly I fret till twilight falls.
Swifter than a weaver's shuttle my days have passed,
and vanished, leaving no hope behind.
Remember that my life is but a breath,
and that my eyes will never again see joy.

Perhaps it was impossible for the architects of the lectionary to enable Sunday Mass-goers to catch even a glimpse of the extraordinary work that is the book of Job. Nonetheless it's a great pity that in the whole three-year cycle all we have are two brief texts, just a few Sundays apart, neither of which gives a real clue to the titanic struggle that Job is engaged in.

The passage for today is very much in the spirit of another wisdom book, Ecclesiastes (or Qoheleth). The question is, does life have any meaning or purpose? Is it no more than a fleeting succession of days and nights that fail to satisfy? Is there anything at all to look forward to?

The question is real enough, and continues to be asked in much contemporary literature. What we miss here is the context of Job's anguish – the loss of everything he held dear in spite of his blameless life. If it can be said that the book of Job offers an answer to the riddle of innocent suffering, we get no hint of it here.

The challenge for readers is to proclaim the reading with all its heaviness of spirit. It is a dark text that invites reader and congregation alike to enter into Job's sombre mood and sense of hopelessness. It should be read slowly enough to convey its deep seriousness.

Readers will note that the text from the NRSV is gender-inclusive.

Responsorial Psalm

Ps 146:1–6

R. Praise the Lord who heals the broken-hearted.

or

R. Alleluia!

Praise the Lord for he is good;
sing to our God for he is loving;
to him our praise is due. **R.**

The Lord builds up Jerusalem
and brings back Israel's exiles,
he heals the broken-hearted,
he binds up all their wounds.
he fixes the number of the stars;
he calls each one by its name. **R.**

Our Lord is great and almighty;
his wisdom can never be measured.
The Lord raises the lowly;
he humbles the wicked to the dust. **R.**

Responsorial Psalm

Normally the responsorial psalm connects sympathetically with the first reading. Sometimes the link is weak or isn't too obvious. On this occasion there is an exceptionally stark contrast between the two. The reading that has just been proclaimed is gloomy and dispirited in tone, while the psalm is entirely exuberant. From start to finish Psalm 146/147 is a joyful song of praise. This makes the transition from reading to responsorial psalm quite disconcerting; perhaps a longer pause than usual between the two might be helpful.

The response does make reference to "the broken-hearted" but within a happy shout of praise. All three verses of the psalm give voice to an uninhibited spirit of praise and thanks. Readers will note that no two verses are the same in length, the first being shorter than average, the second longer. They will need to give clear visual and vocal cues to the congregation to prompt the response at the right time, without resorting to the intrusive directive "Response".

**A reading from the first letter of St Paul
to the Corinthians 9:16–19, 22– 23**

I do not boast of preaching the gospel, since it is a duty which has been laid on me; I should be punished if I did not preach it! If I had chosen this work myself, I might have been paid for it, but as I have not, it is a responsibility which has been put into my hands. Do you know what my reward is? It is this: in my preaching, to be able to offer the Good News free, and not insist on the rights which the gospel gives me.

So though I am not a slave of any man I have made myself the slave of everyone so as to win as many as I could. For the weak I made myself weak. I made myself all things to all men in order to save some at any cost; and I still do this, for the sake of the gospel, to have a share in its blessing.

**A reading from the holy Gospel
according to Mark 1:29–39**

On leaving the synagogue, Jesus went with James and John straight to the house of Simon and Andrew. Now Simon's mother-in-law had gone to bed with fever, and they told him about her straightaway. He went to her, took her by the hand and helped her up. And the fever left her and she began to wait on them.

That evening, after sunset, they brought to him all who were sick and those who were possessed by devils. The whole town came crowding round the door, and he cured many who were suffering from diseases of one kind or another; he also cast out many devils, but he would not allow them to speak, because they knew who he was.

In the morning, long before dawn, he got up and left the house, and went off to a lonely place and prayed there. Simon and his companions set out in search of him, and when they found him they said, 'Everybody is looking for you.' He answered, 'Let us go elsewhere, to the neighbouring country towns, so that I can preach there too, because that is why I came.' And he went all through Galilee, preaching in their synagogues and casting out devils.

Second Reading

For today's reading the lectionary leap-frogs over Chapter Eight of 1 Corinthians in which Paul addresses the vexed question of whether Christians are free to eat food that has been offered to idols. We move to the next chapter in which Paul vigorously defends his status and behaviour as an apostle. In particular he claims that he has not exercised his right as a preacher to demand material support from the community.

To get a sense of the energy with which Paul argues his case readers would do well to read the whole of Chapter 9. Paul is no shrinking violet when it comes to justifying himself. The tone of the passage is that of an address to the jury. It should be read in that spirit, with vigour and conviction.

The text itself presents no great difficulties, but some might be put off by what is very close to boasting on Paul's part. What saves him is the compelling truth of his claim: "I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some" (NRSV).

Gospel

Mark's Jesus is constantly on the move. Again and again Mark makes reference to time and place to convey the dynamism of Jesus' mission. That's the case in today's gospel passage; the succession of times and places communicates an unmistakeable sense of urgency.

It's still the sabbath when Jesus leaves the synagogue and goes to Simon Peter's house. There he cures Simon's mother-in-law. Then as evening falls he exercises his healing power on behalf of the locals who have respectfully waited until the sabbath is over before bringing the sick and possessed to him.

Even the time Jesus spends in solitary prayer before dawn is but a short interlude before he must head off again to preach and heal "all through Galilee". Every episode in this first chapter of Mark exemplifies Jesus' campaign opener: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news".

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)