

SUNDAY READINGS

READ AT HOME

Thirty-First Sunday in Ordinary Time

Year B

31 October 2021



Collect

Almighty and merciful God,
by whose gift your faithful offer you
right and praiseworthy service,
grant, we pray,
that we may hasten without stumbling
to receive the things you have promised.
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

“There is no commandment greater than these”. So Jesus declares to the sincere scribe who approaches him. Jesus does not invent the pithy sayings he quotes. They were already embedded in his own Jewish tradition as well as in others. The originality of Jesus lies in two things: the personal testimony of his own unconditional love of God and neighbour, and the revelation that in him the infinite love of God has taken flesh and dwelt among us.

With good reason we could say that this twofold command – to love God with all our might and to love our neighbour as ourselves – is Jesus’ last will and testament, soon to be embodied in bread and wine. Like Matthew, but unlike Luke and Paul, Mark does not record Jesus’ own command at the Last Supper to “do this in memory of me”. In his gospel it remains unspoken. Not so in the liturgy. Every time we celebrate eucharist we repeat these words loud and clear.

But we should never imagine that when Jesus tells us to “do this in memory of me” he is just giving an instruction about what to do with bread and wine. To “do this” as he commands is to commit ourselves to love as he loved, to love God and neighbour with all our heart and mind and soul and strength.

A reading from the book of Deuteronomy 6:2–6

Moses said to the people: 'If you fear the Lord your God all the days of your life and if you keep all his laws and commandments which I lay on you, you will have a long life, you and your son and your grandson. Listen then, Israel, keep and observe what will make you prosper and give you great increase, as the Lord God of your fathers has promised you, giving you a land where milk and honey flow.

'Listen, Israel: The Lord our God is the one Lord. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength. Let these words I urge on you today be written on your heart.'

First Reading

This short passage from the book of Deuteronomy contains the formula that lies at the heart of Jewish faith and prayer. Leading into it are God's promises to Israel – long life, generations of descendants, prosperity, and “a land where milk and honey flow”. But the fulfilment of these promises is conditional, not automatic. The blessings foreshadowed are dependent on Israel's loyalty to the God who has made covenant with them.

All is summed up in the confession of faith that follows. It combines a one sentence creed – “The Lord our God is the one Lord” – with a command – “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart . . .” – and a directive – “Let these words . . . be written on your hearts”. All of this became the first part of the Shema Yisrael, the essential Jewish prayer recited twice a day. It will be familiar to Christian believers because of Jesus' affirmation of it in the gospel.

The reading is straightforward in that the words and phrases themselves present no difficulty. But readers should be aware of the central importance of these verses for both Jews and Christians. They should proclaim the text with a degree of deliberate solemnity, most especially the concluding declaration.

Responsorial Psalm

Ps 17:2–4, 47, 51

R. I love you, Lord, my strength.

I love you, Lord, my strength,
my rock, my fortress, my saviour.

My God is the rock where I take refuge;
my shield, my mighty help, my stronghold.

The Lord is worthy of all praise:
when I call I am saved from my foes. R.

Long life to the Lord, my rock!
Praised be the God who saves me.
He has given great victories to his king
and shown his love for his anointed. R.

Responsorial Psalm

Psalm 17/18 is a prayer of praise offered to God by a king who has been saved from his enemies. It is found also in 2 Samuel 22 where David gives thanks for having been delivered from the murderous hands of Saul.

The response is the same as the first line of the psalm: “I love you, Lord, my strength”. The verses selected for the responsorial psalm could be prayed by anyone who has experienced God's help in a time of distress. It is only in the last two lines that mention is made of “his king” and “his anointed”.

The spirit of the psalm is one of love and gratitude; readers should find themselves naturally adopting this tone. They need to take care with the first verse because of its extra length. This means ending the fourth line with an upward intonation to make it clear there is more to come. At the end of the sixth line a downward intonation and an upward glance should be sufficient cues for the response.

A reading from the letter to the Hebrews 7:23–28

There used to be a great number of priests under the former covenant, because death put an end to each one of them; but this one, Christ, because he remains for ever, can never lose his priesthood. It follows then, that his power to save is utterly certain, since he is living for ever to intercede for all who come to God through him.

To suit us, the ideal high priest would have to be holy, innocent and uncontaminated, beyond the influence of sinners, and raised up above the heavens; one who would not need to offer sacrifices every day, as the other high priests do for their own sins and then for those of the people, because he has done this once and for all by offering himself. The Law appoints high priests who are men subject to weakness; but the promise on oath, which came after the Law, appointed the Son who is made perfect for ever.

A reading from the holy Gospel according to Mark

12:28–34

One of the scribes came up to Jesus and put a question to him, 'Which is the first of all the commandments?' Jesus replied, 'This is the first: Listen, Israel, the Lord our God is the one Lord, and you must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind and with all your strength. The second is this: You must love your neighbour as yourself. There is no commandment greater than these.' The scribe said to him, 'Well spoken, master; what you have said is true: that he is one and there is no other. To love with all your heart, with all your understanding and strength and to love your neighbour as yourself, this is far more important than any holocaust or sacrifice.' Jesus, seeing how wisely he had spoken said, 'You are not far from the kingdom of God.' And after that no one dared to question him any more.

Second Reading

The lectionary selections from the letter to the Hebrews skip from the beginning of Chapter 5 to the end of Chapter 7. Thus, almost three chapters that contain serious warnings, some reassurance and a lengthy comparison between the priesthood of Jesus and that of Melchizedek, are omitted.

Today's reading contrasts the limitations of the traditional high priesthood with the everlasting nature of Jesus' priesthood. There have been many high priests, but only one Jesus. They are sinners, he is not. Their priesthood ends in death, that of Jesus does not. They must offer sacrifice time and again, but Jesus has offered himself once and for all.

Here the author seems to make Jesus quite other-worldly ("holy, innocent and uncontaminated, beyond the influence of sinners"). This needs to be balanced with what was said earlier: "For it is not as if we had a high priest who was incapable of feeling our weaknesses; but we have one who has been tempted in every way that we are, though he is without sin" (4:15).

The key sentence around which this whole reading revolves comes early: "It follows, then, that his power to save is utterly certain, since he is living for ever to intercede for all who come to God through him". The rest either leads up to or away from this strong declaration. Readers need to make sure that if there is one thing that congregations hear and remember it is this.

Gospel

As with the reading from Hebrews, the lectionary leaps over a fair-sized portion of Mark's gospel to arrive at today's passage. Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem, his cleansing of the temple, some controversies and a parable are all omitted, though heard in one form or another at other times.

The gospel for today is so familiar that many could recite it off by heart. It's Jesus' answer to the often-asked question of his day: "Which is the first of all the commandments?". It is noteworthy that the scribe who puts the question to Jesus is depicted positively. He is making a genuine enquiry, not trying to trap Jesus.

Jesus' reply links the overriding command to love God (as prescribed in the first reading) with the command to love neighbour as spelt out in Leviticus 19:18. He is therefore not inventing a new command as such. Nor may he have been the first to forge such a link. But he articulates it clearly and lives it unconditionally. The scribe's response echoes the preaching of the prophets and earns him Jesus' commendation.

The task for the proclaimer of this gospel is to make it sound as fresh as it ever was. It conveys core convictions from both Old and New Testaments and deserves to be delivered with persuasive power. This episode combines great human appeal with profound teaching.

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)