

SUNDAY READINGS

READ AT HOME

Twentieth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Year C

14 August 2022



Collect

O God, who have prepared for those who love you
good things which no eye can see,
fill our hearts, we pray, with the warmth of your love,
so that, loving you in all things and above all things,
we may attain your promises,
which surpass every human desire.
Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son,
who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
God, for ever and ever.
Amen.

Readings and Commentaries

John the Baptist, so Luke and Matthew tell us, spoke of one to come after him who would “baptise . . . with the Holy Spirit and fire” (Mt 3:11; Lk 3:16). What kind of fire did John have in mind? Was it the fire of purification announced by the prophets of the past? Malachi, for example, foresaw one who would be “like the refiner’s fire and the fuller’s alkali” (3:3). Or was the Baptist anticipating the fire of Pentecost, the flames of missionary fervour that transformed the apostles? Certainly, when Jesus cries out about fire and baptism as he does today, it’s because of zeal for his mission.

Nowadays we are familiar with the words “baptism of fire.” The phrase only seems to have appeared in the nineteenth century, coined to describe a soldier’s first experience of being under fire in battle. Since then, it has become common usage for any ordeal that a person goes through for the first time. It’s fair to say that few would be aware of its biblical associations.

It may also be true that few of the baptised think of their baptism in terms of fire, and that may be a pity. Imagining baptism as fire might show us that to be baptised is to be ablaze with missionary fervour. And if there is one thing that Pope Francis is calling us to be, it’s a missionary Church.

A reading from the prophet Jeremiah 38:4–6, 8–10

The king's leading men spoke to the king. 'Let Jeremiah be put to death: he is unquestionably disheartening the remaining soldiers in the city, and all the people too, by talking like this.

The fellow does not have the welfare of this people at heart so much as its ruin.' 'He is in your hands as you know,' King Zedekiah answered 'for the king is powerless against you.' So they took Jeremiah and threw him into the well of Prince Malchiah in the Court of the Guard, letting him down with ropes. There was no water in the well, only mud, and into the mud Jeremiah sank.

Ebed-melech came out from the palace and spoke to the king. 'My lord king,' he said, 'these men have done a wicked thing by treating the prophet Jeremiah like this: they have thrown him into the well where he will die.' At this the king gave Ebed-melech the Cushite the following order: 'Take three men with you from here and pull the prophet Jeremiah out of the well before he dies.'

Responsorial Psalm Ps 39:2–4, 18

R. Lord, come to my aid!

I waited, I waited for the Lord
and he stooped down to me;
he heard my cry. **R.**

He drew me from the deadly pit,
from the miry clay.

He set my feet upon a rock
and made my footsteps firm. **R.**

He put a new song into my mouth,
praise of our God.

Many shall see and fear
and shall trust in the Lord. **R.**

As for me, wretched and poor,
the Lord thinks of me.

You are my rescuer, my help,
O God, do not delay! **R.**

First Reading

It's a perennial question for small nations threatened by much larger hostile forces. Should they engage in what seems futile resistance or should they sue for peace? This was hotly debated in Jerusalem about 600 BC. Faced with the might of the Babylonian empire, King Zedekiah was advised by some of his courtiers to ally himself with the power of Egypt and fight back. Jeremiah took the opposing view, recommending the city accept its fate and surrender.

Jeremiah's unpopular political advice, along with his support for religious reforms, made him a ready target for ridicule and rejection. Accused of undermining the morale of the troops and already imprisoned in the guards' quarters, the prophet is left to die in the miry depths of a well. A lone foreigner at court, Ebed-Melech, persuades the king to spare Jeremiah's life and he is rescued.

As usual, readers do not have the opportunity to alert the assembly to the context of Jeremiah's misadventure. But they have a potentially tragic story that has a happy ending to relate. Lest they stumble over the pronunciation of the four proper names – Jeremiah, Zedekiah, Malchiah and Ebed-Melech the Cushite – and forfeit the momentum of the drama, they should check and make sure they can name these names with confidence.

Responsorial Psalm

One can readily imagine Jeremiah crying out to God with the words of today's psalm response, "Lord, come to my aid!" Like Jeremiah, the psalmist was delivered from a life-threatening predicament. Psalm 39/40 is partly a song of thanksgiving for this deliverance, but also a plea for help in a time of further distress.

The verses selected for the responsorial psalm include one that seems to describe Jeremiah's experience in the muddy well. "He drew me from the deadly pit," the psalmist exclaims, and "from the miry clay." But more than likely this is a reference to Sheol, the shadowy underworld of the dead.

The first three verses and the first half of the fourth function as a confession of faith, testifying to the saving help that the psalmist has experienced and continues to experience from God. The final two lines become a prayer for God's help that echoes the response. The lines are short but should not be combined. Readers who respect the poetic form of the verses will assist the assembly to pray with the psalmist.

A reading from the letter to the Hebrews 12:1–4

With so many witnesses in a great cloud on every side of us, we too, then, should throw off everything that hinders us, especially the sin that clings so easily, and keep running steadily in the race we have started. Let us not lose sight of Jesus, who leads us in our faith and brings it to perfection: for the sake of the joy which was still in the future, he endured the cross, disregarding the shameful of it, and from now on has taken his place at the right of God's throne. Think of the way he stood such opposition from sinners and then you will not give up for want of courage. In the fight against sin, you have not yet had to keep fighting to the point of death.

A reading from the holy Gospel according to Luke

12:49–53

Jesus said to his disciples: 'I have come to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were blazing already! There is a baptism I must still receive, and how great is my distress till it is over!

'Do you suppose that I am here to bring peace on earth? No, I tell you, but rather division. For from now on a household of five will be divided: three against two and two against three; the father divided against the son, son against father, mother against daughter, daughter against mother, mother-in-law against daughter-in-law, daughter-in-law against mother-in-law.'

Second Reading

The recipients of the letter to the Hebrews appear to be disheartened and in sore need of encouragement, so the author seeks to bolster their faith by stressing the uniqueness of Christ's priesthood and the supremacy of his sacrifice. By his willing obedience on the cross Jesus brought the whole sacrificial system to an end and gained free access to the heavenly sanctuary once and for all.

Today the author introduces the metaphor of a race. The Old Testament exemplars of faith that he has listed in the previous chapter are "witnesses in a great cloud on every side," like a crowd cheering on believers in the race towards their heavenly destination. As they run, they are urged to fix their eyes on Jesus who has made his way through opposition, suffering and crucifixion to "the right of God's throne." If they keep him in sight, they "will not give up for want of courage." At this point the metaphor changes from a race to a fight, either in the boxing ring or on the battlefield.

In keeping with the letter's high literary style, the argument is set out in relatively long and elaborate sentences. Readers will need to rehearse their proclamation thoroughly to be sure they give strong emphasis to the key affirmations and lead the assembly thoughtfully through the explanatory clauses.

Gospel

Baptism and fire may appear strange companions but Jesus connects them closely today. He's speaking out as he continues on his way to Jerusalem, the city he is soon to address as "you that kill the prophets and stone those who are sent to you!" (13:34, a lament never heard at Sunday Mass).

Well aware of the ordeal that awaited him, Jesus cries out with a strength of feeling that brings the agony in the garden to mind. Would that the fire of purification or judgement were already blazing! Would that he were already being plunged into the tide of suffering that lay ahead! The stark choice he was facing sheds light on the dire prediction of division with which he continues. Those who chose to follow him needed to be ready to face conflict, even with those dearest to them. As we will hear in a few Sundays' time, "If anyone comes to me without hating his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters . . . he cannot be my disciple" (14:26, NRSV).

The catalogue of relationships in dispute makes for difficult proclamation; it's not a cheerful topic and it seems laboured. But it ought not be hurried through. It needs to be heard as a corollary of Jesus' own passionate commitment to his mission.

Concluding Prayer

Solemn Blessing (Ordinary Time II)

May the peace of God,
which surpasses all understanding,
keep your hearts and minds
in the knowledge and love of God,
and of his Son, our Lord Jesus Christ.
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 II, Roman Missal p. 715)