

SUNDAY READINGS

READ AT HOME

Second Sunday in Ordinary Time

Year A

15 January 2023



Collect

Almighty ever-living God,
who govern all things,
both in heaven and on earth,
mercifully hear the pleading of your people
and bestow your peace on our times.
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

The Baptist's proclamation of Jesus as the lamb of God is found in several prayers at the Lord's Supper. It's in the canticle "Glory to God in the highest," it's repeated three times in the litany at the breaking of bread, and it's invoked by the presider as the holy gifts are presented to the faithful before communion. Being so familiar, it may surprise some to learn that biblical scholars aren't all agreed about its significance. Some see a reference to the blood of the paschal lamb smeared on the doorposts of the Israelites in Egypt to save them from the destroying angel (Ex 12:23). Others connect the term with the Suffering Servant who was "like a lamb that was led to the slaughterhouse" (Is 53:7). In the book of Revelation, the Lamb is a key figure representing divine victory: "The Lamb who was sacrificed is worthy to be given power, riches, wisdom, strength, honour, glory and blessing" (5:12). All this suggests that, rather than look for a single correct meaning, we are free to let our imaginations play with the phrase "lamb of God" and let its rich allusions feed our faith.

A reading from the prophet Isaiah 49:3, 5–6

The Lord said to me, 'You are my servant, Israel, in whom I shall be glorified';
I was honoured in the eyes of the Lord,
my God was my strength.
And now the Lord has spoken,
he who formed me in the womb to be his servant,
to bring Jacob back to him,
to gather Israel to him:

'It is not enough for you to be my servant,
to restore the tribes of Jacob
and bring back the survivors of Israel;
I will make you the light of the nations
so that my salvation may reach
to the ends of the earth.'

Responsorial Psalm Ps 39:2, 4, 7–10

R. Here I am, Lord;
I come to do your will.

I waited, I waited for the Lord
and he stooped down to me;
he heard my cry.
He put a new song into my mouth,
praise of our God. **R.**

You do not ask for sacrifice and offerings,
but an open ear.
You do not ask for holocaust and victim.
Instead, here am I. **R.**

In the scroll of the book it stands written
that I should do your will.
My God, I delight in your law
in the depth of my heart. **R.**

Your justice I have proclaimed
in the great assembly.
My lips I have not sealed;
you know it, O Lord. **R.**

First Reading

Mysterious figures abound in the Old Testament, even if they have a name, like Melchizedek. Today's mystery person is nameless but is referred to as the "servant". Four passages in the prophet Isaiah, known as the servant songs, are attributed to this character. The servant, divinely chosen to bear witness to God's saving purpose, even by suffering, has been variously identified as one of Israel's kings, as Isaiah himself, or as the whole people. Christian tradition sees Jesus as the ultimate suffering servant.

This oracle of Isaiah appears to be addressed to the Israelites exiled in Babylon. In the first place it encourages them to hope for return and restoration. But it goes much further. The servant is given a universal mission, to be "the light of the nations" and to proclaim salvation "to the ends of the earth". The language of this reading has parallels in the psalms and in the call of Jeremiah. It also brings to mind Simeon's canticle (Lk 2:29-32) and Jesus' claims to be "the light of the world" in John's gospel (8:12 and 9:5; cf 1:4-5). It's cited in the Acts of the Apostles as the mandate for Paul and Barnabas' mission to the pagans (13:47).

Careful examination of the passage will show that it has a number of components. These are clearer in the Jerusalem Bible lectionary in comparison with the NRSV which leaves most of the text as a single, complex and awkward sentence.

The reading begins with God's address to the servant. The servant then makes a short statement in response before introducing God's second and final declaration of the servant's mission. Each of these elements needs to be delineated by the reader's tone of voice and judicious pausing. Above all, the final two lines should be heard as the happy climax of the whole passage.

Responsorial Psalm

Psalm 39/40 is not only a perfect match for the servant songs of Isaiah but also a pithy blend of themes from the prophets, the wisdom writers and other psalms. The response, "Here I am, Lord; I come to do your will," sets the tone immediately. This is the essence of the servant's response to God's commission.

Each of the four stanzas of the responsorial psalm has its own character. The first is rooted in the psalmist's experience of being saved from a desperate situation. God has not only heard and acted on the psalmist's plea, but has added the gift of praise. The second sums up a core teaching of the prophets. Self-offering in obedience to God's word takes priority over the offering of sacrifices. This verse is cited in the letter to the Hebrews (10:5-7) and applied to Christ's self-sacrifice on the cross.

The third stanza echoes Psalm 118/119, the longest of the psalms, in its praise of the Law as God's life-giving word. In the fourth and final stanza, the psalmist makes the bold claim of having testified faithfully before the assembled community.

Right from the start, the assembly is asked to plunge in and make the servant's unequivocal pledge their own. For this to happen the words of the response must be clearly proclaimed. An upward inflection at the end of the first phrase will allow for a pause before the second. Together the two parts form an emphatic declaration. Readers will also need to take care with the five-line first stanza.

**A reading from the first letter of St Paul
to the Corinthians 1:1–3**

I, Paul, appointed by God to be an apostle, together with brother Sosthenes, send greetings to the church of God in Corinth, to the holy people of Jesus Christ, who are called to take their place among all the saints everywhere who pray to our Lord Jesus Christ; for he is their Lord no less than ours. May God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ send you grace and peace.

**A reading from the holy Gospel
according to John 1:29–34**

Seeing Jesus coming towards him, John said, 'Look, there is the lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world. This is the one I spoke of when I said: A man is coming after me who ranks before me because he existed before me. I did not know him myself, and yet it was to reveal him to Israel that I came baptising with water.' John also declared, 'I saw the Spirit coming down on him from heaven like a dove and resting on him. I did not know him myself, but he who sent me to baptise with water had said to me, "The man on whom you see the Spirit come down and rest is the one who is going to baptise with the Holy Spirit." Yes, I have seen and I am the witness that he is the Chosen One of God.'

Second Reading

Over the next several Sundays we hear a series of readings from Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. As is the case today, Paul begins all his letters with a self-introduction, followed by a greeting of grace. Curiously, the lectionary includes these introductions from some of Paul's letters but not from others. It's strange, also, that today's reading omits his prayer of thanks for God's gifts to the Corinthians.

While called the first, this letter is agreed to be the second Paul wrote to the spirited community at Corinth. He knew them well, having spent some eighteen months proclaiming the gospel there. Like Corinth itself, a cosmopolitan port city at the cross-roads between east and west, the Christian community was diverse. Rich and poor, Jewish and pagan, liberal and conservative, educated and uneducated – all kinds of polarities were represented. Though blessed with many gifts of the Spirit, the community was prone to division, pride, argument and faction-fighting.

None of this is evident in the opening verses we read today. It is gracious, affirmative and peaceful. Perhaps there is one hint of the sharp criticisms to come when Paul reminds them that they are not autonomous. They "take their place among all the saints everywhere who pray to our Lord Jesus Christ".

Readers will quickly see that the bulk of this short reading is one extended sentence (which the NRSV divides). They need to analyse it carefully to identify the primary components that should be given clear emphasis as distinct from secondary elaborations. It should be a pleasure to convey Paul's greeting to the assembly.

Gospel

In most years, the feast of the Baptism of the Lord both concludes the Christmas season and serves as the First Sunday of Ordinary Time, though in some years it is displaced to the Monday. Today's gospel, not from this year's evangelist Matthew but from John, indirectly records Jesus' baptism. As well as echoing the Christmas season in this way, its focus on John the Baptist brings back memories of Advent.

It's a rich text, full of allusions and connections. Here are some of them. The term "lamb of God" may combine reference to the paschal lamb and the suffering servant. In John's gospel (19:14) Jesus is taken away for crucifixion as the Passover lambs were being sacrificed. Jesus' eternal origin, spelt out in the Prologue, is implied in John's statement "he existed before me".

In this gospel the purpose of John's baptism was not to call for repentance but to reveal Jesus, in accord with the role of witness that the Prologue ascribes to the Baptist (1:7). Jesus' baptism is reported via the Baptist's testimony rather than directly described. The Spirit is said to rest or remain on Jesus, foreshadowing Jesus' words about the Spirit's abiding presence in his farewell discourse. Finally, most translations now prefer the reading "Son of God" rather than the JB's "Chosen One of God," in spite of the latter's allusion to the Suffering Servant.

In short, this is a reading to prompt deep reflection on Jesus' identity. It offers much food for thought at this stage of Ordinary Time.

Concluding Blessing

May the Lord bless us and keep us.

Amen.

May he let his face shine upon us
and show us his mercy.

Amen.

May he turn his countenance towards us
and give us his 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 I, Roman Missal p 714)