

# SUNDAY READINGS

## READ AT HOME

Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Year A

12 February 2023



### 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

On the feast of St Joseph in 2018, Pope Francis published an apostolic exhortation “On the Call to Holiness in Today’s World”. He may have surprised some by warning about modern-day gnosticism. Here’s a passage that complements today’s reading from Paul to the Corinthians.

“Thanks be to God, throughout the history of the Church it has always been clear that a person’s perfection is measured not by the information or knowledge they possess, but by the depth of their charity. ‘Gnostics’ do not understand this, because they judge others based on their ability to understand the complexity of certain doctrines. They think of the intellect as separate from the flesh, and thus become incapable of touching Christ’s suffering flesh in others, locked up as they are in an encyclopaedia of abstractions. In the end, by disembodiment the mystery, they prefer ‘a God without Christ, a Christ without the Church, a Church without her people.’” (#37)

### **A reading from the book of Ecclesiasticus 15:15–20**

If you wish, you can keep the commandments,  
to behave faithfully is within your power.  
He has set fire and water before you;  
put out your hand to whichever you prefer.  
Man has life and death before him;  
whichever a man likes better will be given him.  
For vast is the wisdom of the Lord;  
he is almighty and all-seeing.  
His eyes are on those who fear him,  
he notes every action of man.  
He never commanded anyone to be godless,  
he has given no one permission to sin.

### **Responsorial Psalm Ps 118:1–2, 4–5, 17–18, 33–34**

**R.** Happy are they who follow the law of the Lord!

They are happy whose life is blameless,  
who follow God's law!

They are happy those who do his will,  
seeking him with all their hearts. **R.**

You have laid down your precepts  
to be obeyed with care.

May my footsteps be firm  
to obey your statutes. **R.**

Bless your servant and I shall live  
and obey your word.

Open my eyes that I may consider  
the wonders of your law. **R.**

Teach me the demands of your statutes  
and I will keep them to the end.

Train me to observe your law,  
to keep it with my heart. **R.**

### **A reading from the first letter of St Paul to the Corinthians**

**2:6–10**

We have a wisdom to offer those who have reached maturity: not a philosophy of our age, it is true, still less of the masters of our age, which are coming to their end. The hidden wisdom of God which we teach in our mysteries is the wisdom that God predestined to be for our glory before the ages began. It is a wisdom that none of the masters of this age have ever known, or they would not have crucified the Lord of Glory; we teach what scripture calls: the things that no eye has seen and no ear has heard, things beyond the mind of man, all that God has prepared for those who love him.

These are the very things that God has revealed to us through the Spirit, for the Spirit reaches the depths of everything, even the depths of God.

### **First Reading**

The wisdom books of the Old Testament come a poor fourth in the lectionary stakes. First prize by a long shot goes to the prophets, especially Isaiah, second to the Pentateuch (the first five books), and third to the so-called historical books. In spite of its fifty-one chapters, the book of Ecclesiasticus, or The Wisdom of Ben Sira (Sirach for short), only appears a few times. Written maybe about 150 years before the birth of Jesus, it is the fruit of sustained reflection on the biblical tradition, leavened with Greek philosophical thought.

Today's short reading begins with a very positive view of free choice. It makes the unqualified declaration that human beings have the capacity to keep the commandments and behave faithfully. The corollary of this assertion is that humankind have their fate in their own hands. They can opt for life (imaged by water) or death (imaged by fire). The ultimate arbiter of their destiny, however, is the God who sees, knows and notes every human action. The reading concludes by absolving God of any blame for the sins of humanity.

These few succinct verses are not the last word on the subject of free choice and responsibility. Innumerable works have since been written and conflicting theological positions taken. It's not the reader's role to illuminate the subject, however, other than by proclaiming the text thoughtfully and faithfully. The NRSV lectionary translates the passage inclusively.

### **Responsorial Psalm**

The four short stanzas of the responsorial psalm give no clue that they are taken from the longest and most elaborate of all the psalms. From beginning to end, Psalm 118/119 is a prolonged celebration of God's gift of the Torah, the Law, to the people of Israel. It combines an intricate structure – twenty-two eight-line sections, each linked to a letter of the Hebrew alphabet – with an unsystematic and repetitive development of the theme. Whether named as statutes, precepts or decrees, the Law is honoured as God's life-giving word.

Hebrew poetry's enjoyment of repetition and restatement may not be immediately appreciated by those who prefer to get directly to the point. It calls for a meditative mind-set. The psalm's emphasis on obedience may also be felt unfashionable, but for faithful believers this expresses an enduring truth. The Law is an inexhaustible treasure of wisdom to guide us on the path of life. Jesus came, as we hear him say in today's gospel, not to abolish the Law and the Prophets, but to fulfil them.

The response establishes an upbeat spirit right from the start. This should be sustained throughout. In the verses themselves, most of the lines are quite short. In keeping with the poetic nature of the psalm, each line should be respected as a unit and not merged with the following line.

## A reading from the holy Gospel according to Matthew

5:17–37

Jesus said to his disciples:

[‘ Do not imagine that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets. I have come not to abolish them but to complete them. I tell you solemnly, till heaven and earth disappear, not one dot, one little stroke, shall disappear from the Law until its purpose is achieved. Therefore, the man who infringes even one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be considered the least in the kingdom of heaven; but the man who keeps them and teaches them will be considered great in the kingdom of heaven.

‘For] I tell you, if your virtue goes no deeper than that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never get into the kingdom of heaven.

‘You have learnt how it was said to our ancestors: You must not kill; and if anyone does kill he must answer for it before the court. But I say this to you: anyone who is angry with his brother will answer for it before the court

[; if a man calls his brother “Fool” he will answer for it before the Sanhedrin; and if a man calls him

“Renegade” he will answer for it in hell fire. So then, if you are bringing your offering to the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your offering there before the altar, go and be reconciled with your brother first, and then come back and present your offering. Come to terms with your opponent in good time while you are still on the way to the court with him, or he may hand you over to the judge and the judge to the officer, and you will be thrown into prison. I tell you solemnly, you will not get out till you have paid the last penny].

‘You have learnt how it was said: You must not commit adultery. But I say this to you: if a man looks at a woman lustfully, he has already committed adultery with her in his heart. [If your right eye should cause you to sin, tear it out and throw it away; for it will do you less harm to lose one part of you than to have your whole body thrown into hell. And if your right hand should cause you to sin, cut it off and throw it away; for it will do you less harm to lose one part of you than to have your whole body go to hell.

‘It has also been said: Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a writ of dismissal. But I say this to you: everyone who divorces his wife, except for the case of fornication, makes her an adulteress; and anyone who marries a divorced woman commits adultery.]

‘Again, you have learnt how it was said to our ancestors: You must not break your oath, but must fulfil your oaths to the Lord. But I say this to you: do not swear at all [, either by heaven, since that is God’s throne; or by the earth, since that is his footstool; or by Jerusalem, since that is the city of the great king. Do not swear by your own head either, since you cannot turn a single hair white or black]. All you need say is “Yes” if you mean yes, “No” if you mean no; anything more than this comes from the evil one.’

[Short Form: omit text in brackets.]

## Second Reading

Ironically, after having chastised the Corinthians for their claims to superiority, Paul now credits them with a maturity that equips them to grasp the unique wisdom he teaches. At first glance this seems to make them “gnostics” or privileged possessors of secret spiritual knowledge.

The way that Paul describes this wisdom prompts such a perception. He says it’s different from the wisdom of “the masters of our age”. It’s “hidden,” taught “in our mysteries,” “predestined,” “beyond the (human) mind,” “revealed to us through the Spirit”. All this would be misleading if we did not remember from last Sunday’s reading, that the wisdom that Paul is expounding is embodied in the crucified Christ. Nothing could be more earthy than that. But at the same time it is a wisdom that discloses an unimaginably glorious destiny.

This text demands careful study and reflection. Its depth of meaning is likely to elude the assembly if readers have not taken the time to explore and understand it. It’s always wise of readers to imagine themselves in the place of the gathered faithful and ask themselves how they can communicate the fruits of their preparation in a single proclamation. It’s quite a challenge.

## Gospel

Those responsible for proclaiming today’s passage from the Sermon on the Mount are faced with a rather difficult choice. They are expected to opt either for an unusually long text or a much shorter one that lacks key components. The longer text begins with Jesus’ declaration that he has come to fulfil, not abolish, the Law and the Prophets. It goes on with the first four of the six antitheses in which Jesus offers his own authoritative and generally much more demanding interpretation of the Law. The issues he addresses are anger, adultery, divorce and oath-swearing.

The shorter reading begins with the final part of Jesus’ introductory explanation, abbreviates three of the antitheses, and omits the controversial one on divorce altogether. Assuming that ministers of the gospel are more likely than not to choose the briefer text, one might regret that it didn’t include the first two sentences of the longer option.

Ministers who choose the longer option are taking responsibility for maintaining the assembly’s attention throughout. They are aided in this task by the clear division of the text into five discrete units, the introduction and each of the four antitheses. Measured pauses between these five sections, a lively start to each one in succession, and a strong delivery that does justice to Jesus’ authoritative pronouncements will serve the assembly well. Those who select the shorter reading have all the more reason to pause between its four paragraphs.

## Concluding Blessing

May almighty God always keep every adversity far from us  
and in his kindness pour out upon us the gifts of his blessing.

**Amen.**

May God keep our hearts attentive to his words,  
that they may be filled with everlasting gladness.

**Amen.**

And so, may we always understand what is good and right,  
and be found ever hastening along  
in the path of God's commands,  
made coheirs with the citizens of heaven.

**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 V, Roman Missal p 716)