

SUNDAY READINGS

READ AT HOME

Seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time

Year A

19 February 2023



Collect

Grant, we pray, almighty God,
that, always pondering spiritual things,
we may carry out in both word and deed
that which is 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

Jesus' injunction that we be perfect "just as your heavenly Father is perfect" continues to inspire and to daunt. Those who are moved to redouble their efforts to achieve perfection would be wise (in Paul's sense of the word) to revisit what we've heard from his first letter to the Corinthians. A few Sundays ago, he reminded us that we had nothing to boast about because "our wisdom, and our virtue, and our holiness, and our freedom" are all God's doing, not ours.

He put it more plainly in the letter to the Philippians. "I am no longer trying for perfection by my own efforts . . . I want only the perfection that comes through faith in Christ and is from God . . . All I want is to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and to share his sufferings . . ." (3:9-10).

The demands that Jesus makes in the Sermon on the Mount – that we renounce anger, lust, falsehood, revenge and hate in favour of reconciliation, trueness of heart and love of enemies – free us from the illusion of becoming self-made saints. They open our eyes to the grace of God that makes impossible things possible.

A reading from the book of Leviticus
19:1–2, 17–18

The Lord spoke to Moses; he said: ‘Speak to the whole community of the sons of Israel and say to them: “Be holy, for I, the Lord your God, am holy.”

“You must not bear hatred for your brother in your heart. You must openly tell him, your neighbour, of his offence; this way you will not take a sin upon yourself. You must not exact vengeance, nor must you bear a grudge against the children of your people. You must love your neighbour as yourself. I am the Lord.”

Responsorial Psalm Ps 102:1–4, 8, 10, 12–13

R. The Lord is kind and merciful.

My soul, give thanks to the Lord,
all my being, bless his holy name.

My soul, give thanks to the Lord
and never forget all his blessings. **R.**

It is he who forgives all your guilt,
who heals every one of your ills,
who redeems your life from the grave,
who crowns you with love and compassion. **R.**

The Lord is compassion and love,
slow to anger and rich in mercy.
He does not treat us according to our sins
nor repay us according to our faults. **R.**

As far as the east is from the west
so far does he remove our sins.
As a father has compassion on his sons,
the Lord has pity on those who fear him. **R.**

First Reading

In spite of being one of the foundational books of the Old Testament, placed after Genesis and Exodus in the Pentateuch, Leviticus is only used twice and briefly in the three-year cycle. Much of its contents – detailed prescriptions for the rites of worship, priestly duties, ritual purity and moral behaviour – may have little contemporary appeal for Christian believers, yet are vital for our understanding of the Jewish tradition and our shared heritage.

The key to the whole work is found in the decree with which today’s reading begins, “Be holy, for I, the Lord, am holy”. Leviticus is a handbook of holiness. While the people of Israel experienced God’s holiness as awesome, mysterious and transcendent – and therefore quite beyond them – they could still adhere to ethical and ritual practices that reflected divine attributes such as justice and care for the poor.

Today’s passage has been chosen because it contains the command of neighbourly love that Jesus takes up and expands in the gospel. In fact the reading consists of a series of divine commands. As such it is quite solemn in tone. God is laying down the law, not just for ancient Israel but for the world. The decrees are not arbitrary impositions but principles of human flourishing. They should be proclaimed with a firm balance of authority and love.

Responsorial Psalm

God’s demand conveyed to the people by Moses – “Be holy, for I, the Lord your God, am holy” – sounds absolute and therefore impossible to fulfil. Psalm 102/103 offers a more encouraging perspective. In the verses selected for the responsorial psalm, the psalmist praises God’s compassionate understanding of human frailty. God is hailed as one who forgives, heals, redeems and pities. In the patriarchal culture of the time, it’s not surprising that God is imaged as a father showing compassion to wayward sons.

The first two stanzas are in the form of a soliloquy. The psalmist addresses his own self (or soul). In the first, the psalmist tells himself to give thanks for God’s blessings. The second stanza spells out the blessings the psalmist has received – healing, redemption and forgiveness.

The remaining two stanzas are more in the nature of public testimony. The psalmist testifies that the blessings he has personally experienced reveal God’s kindness to all the people. The third stanza repeats the essence of the ancient confession of faith found in Exodus 34:6. All in all, this is a prayer of grateful appreciation for God’s active love and mercy. Its language and structure are clear but readers need to be mindful of the shift mid-way from the personal to the public. They should enjoy engaging the assembly in its positive spirit.

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

3:16–23

Didn't you realise that you were God's temple and that the Spirit of God was living among you? If anybody should destroy the temple of God, God will destroy him, because the temple of God is sacred; and you are that temple.

Make no mistake about it; if any one of you thinks of himself as wise, in the ordinary sense of the word, then he must learn to be a fool before he really can be wise. Why? Because the wisdom of this world is foolishness to God. As scripture says: The Lord knows wise men's thoughts: he knows how useless they are; or again: God is not convinced by the arguments of the wise. So there is nothing to boast about in anything human: Paul, Apollos, Cephas, the world, life and death, the present and the future, are all your servants; but you belong to Christ and Christ belongs to God.

**A reading from the holy Gospel
according to Matthew**

5:38–48

Jesus said to his disciples: 'You have learnt how it was said: Eye for eye and tooth for tooth. But I say this to you: offer the wicked man no resistance. On the contrary, if anyone hits you on the right cheek, offer him the other as well; if a man takes you to law and would have your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. And if anyone orders you to go one mile, go two miles with him. Give to anyone who asks, and if anyone wants to borrow, do not turn away.

'You have learnt how it was said: You must love your neighbour and hate your enemy. But I say this to you: love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you; in this way you will be sons of your Father in heaven, for he causes his sun to rise on bad men as well as good, and his rain to fall on honest and dishonest men alike. For if you love those who love you, what right have you to claim any credit? Even the tax collectors do as much, do they not? And if you save your greetings for your brothers, are you doing anything exceptional? Even the pagans do as much, do they not? You must therefore be perfect just as your heavenly Father is perfect.'

Second Reading

Today's reading from Paul falls into two distinct parts, each of which invites the Corinthians to grasp something quite extraordinary. In the first, which starts abruptly without the preceding verses which readers would do well to check out, Paul tells the community that they are God's temple. As a cosmopolitan port city, Corinth was home to a plethora of temples dedicated to different gods. But it's not in these shrines that the Spirit of God dwells – it's in the body of believers. The force of this assertion is somewhat blunted by Paul's subsequent remark about destruction, but he again asserts, "you are that temple".

In the second and longer section, Paul returns to the issue with which the letter began, the community's factions. In response to the folly of this petty rivalry, Paul opens an expansive vista that puts everything in cosmic perspective. Beginning with the factions' heroes – Paul, Apollos and Cephas – he progressively widens the lens to encompass life and death, the present and the future, Christ himself, and ultimately God. This is the wisdom Paul wants the Corinthians to see and embrace.

Readers will need to address the risk of the assembly's getting lost in the thicket of Paul's rhetoric. They will need to study how his argument progresses so they can lead their hearers successfully into the grand vision with which the reading concludes.

Gospel

The first reading began with the command to Moses that God's people be holy as God is holy. Today's gospel concludes with Jesus' demand that his disciples "be perfect just as your heavenly Father is perfect". This brings to a close the series of six antitheses in which Jesus contrasts the traditional teaching of the Law and the Prophets with what he now teaches on his own authority.

The final two concern revenge and love of enemies. The Old Testament maxim "eye for eye and tooth for tooth" had the positive purpose of limiting retaliation to the measure of the original offence. Jesus now calls for a response of generosity to those who make unjust demands. Such unexpected behaviour would have the potential to disconcert and disarm one's opponents.

Jesus' concluding decree is that we should love our enemies. It's to be noted that nowhere in the Old Testament is there a directive to hate one's enemies, though it was understood that Israel would hate those who hate God (Psalm 138/139:21). Here Jesus speaks of loving and praying for those who are actively hostile, just as God displays indiscriminating benevolence for all. As the New Testament as a whole and Paul in particular makes clear, to be perfect like God is not a human achievement but God's work in us.

Concluding Blessing

May God bless us with every heavenly blessing,
make us always holy and pure in his sight,
pour out in abundance upon us the riches of his glory,
and teach us with the words of truth;
may he instruct us in the Gospel of salvation,
and ever endow us with fraternal charity.
Through Christ our Lord.

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 VI, Roman Missal p 717)

