

SUNDAY READINGS

READ AT HOME

Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Year A

5 February 2023



Collect

Keep your family safe, O Lord, with unfailing care,
that, relying solely on the hope of heavenly grace,
they may be defended always by your protection.
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

Sixty or so years after the last session of Vatican II, the implementation of its vision is still a work in progress. It's been given a new lease of life by a person who wasn't there. Pope Francis wasn't ordained until four years after the Council and not made a bishop until twenty-three years after that. One of the unfinished tasks he and the whole Church still face is to lead worship and justice to a happy and fruitful marriage.

It's often been remarked that the first document of the Council, the *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, had nothing to say about social justice, and the last, the *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*, had nothing to say about liturgy. Whether this is a fair characterisation or not, the fact remains that the Church's life of worship and its works of justice operate in parallel more often than in partnership.

The prophets and Jesus himself decry the performance of religious ritual that does not have a genuine commitment to justice at its heart. And Jesus' own practice makes it clear that working for the reign of God must be nourished by constant prayer. The bishops of Vatican II were inspired to say that the liturgy is the "source and summit" of the Church's life, but this remains more of an aspiration than a reality.

A reading from the prophet Isaiah 58:7–10

Thus says the Lord:

Share your bread with the hungry,
and shelter the homeless poor,
clothe the man you see to be naked
and turn not from your own kin.
Then will your light shine like the dawn
and your wound be quickly healed over.

Your integrity will go before you
and the glory of the Lord behind you.
Cry, and the Lord will answer;
call, and he will say, 'I am here.'

If you do away with the yoke,
the clenched fist, the wicked word,
if you give your bread to the hungry,
and relief to the oppressed,
your light will rise in the darkness,
and your shadows become like noon.

Responsorial Psalm

Ps 111:4–9

R. A light rises in the darkness for the upright.
or

R. Alleluia!

He is a light in the darkness for the upright:
he is generous, merciful and just.
The good man takes pity and lends,
he conducts his affairs with honour. **R.**

The just man will never waver:
he will be remembered for ever.
He has no fear of evil news;
with a firm heart he trusts in the Lord. **R.**

With a steadfast heart he will not fear;
open-handed, he gives to the poor;
his justice stands firm for ever.
His head will be raised in glory. **R.**

First Reading

The book of the prophet Isaiah is conventionally divided into three parts, although much of the material cannot be surely assigned to specific individuals, dates and circumstances. Prophecies from different eras were eventually compiled and edited into a single book.

Today's reading – a plain-spoken admonition to practise social justice – comes from what's called Third Isaiah. It may well have been prompted by the rebuilding of the temple and a revival of religious rites. The people are forcefully reminded that the rituals of worship are worthless if they are not validated by the practice of justice.

The dictates of this prophecy – feed the hungry, shelter the homeless, clothe the naked – may first bring to mind Jesus' final parable, that of the sheep and the goats (Mt 25:31-46), but the image of light connects it with today's passage from the Sermon on the Mount.

The barrage of imperatives is counter-balanced by the promise of light, healing, glory and divine assistance. In a sense, the people are being offered a prescription for the good health of the community rather than a threatening condemnation. It is a strong and direct text that calls for a positive and encouraging proclamation by readers.

Responsorial Psalm

In the first reading, the prophet Isaiah laid out the core demands of social justice and the blessings they bring to those who practise them. Psalm 111/112 mirrors this message. It spells out the characteristics of right living and the rewards they entail. In effect, those who live justly are demonstrating the attributes of Israel's God – generosity, mercy, steadfastness and justice. Just living is a beacon of light for others and a source of blessing for the righteous. They will have honour, strength and glory.

As it stands, the response – "A light rises in the darkness for the upright" – could be interpreted in two ways, depending on how the light is identified. It could mean that the Lord bestows light on those who undertake upright living, or that those who live justly are themselves a source of light for the like-minded. Either way, it forges a link between light and righteous living.

The verses chosen to create the responsorial psalm are plainly expressed and in standard four-line format. The language, however, is persistently exclusive. Readers who wish to adopt inclusive language may be better served by utilising the psalm from the NRSV lectionary rather than attempting to adapt the present text.

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

2:1– 5

When I came to you, brothers, it was not with any show of oratory or philosophy, but simply to tell you what God had guaranteed. During my stay with you, the only knowledge I claimed to have was about Jesus, and only about him as the crucified Christ. Far from relying on any power of my own, I came among you in great 'fear and trembling' and in my speeches and the sermons that I gave, there were none of the arguments that belong to philosophy; only a demonstration of the power of the Spirit. And I did this so that your faith should not depend on human philosophy but on the power of God.

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

5:13–16

Jesus said to his disciples: 'You are the salt of the earth. But if salt becomes tasteless, what can make it salty again? It is good for nothing, and can only be thrown out to be trampled underfoot by men.

'You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill-top cannot be hidden. No one lights a lamp to put it under a tub; they put it on the lamp-stand where it shines for everyone in the house. In the same way your light must shine in the sight of men, so that, seeing your good works, they may give the praise to your Father in heaven.'

Second Reading

In the cosmopolitan port city of Corinth where faiths and philosophies competed for devotees, impressive rhetoric would have been prized for its persuasive power. The fact that Paul succeeded in winning believers for Christ without the gift of oratory proves the point he is making here. It's not sophisticated eloquence that has led them to faith, but the power of the Spirit.

Paul's success in Corinth is doubly remarkable. Not only does he cast himself as a poor speaker, but the subject of his preaching – a figure of shame and ignominy, the crucified Christ – was the antithesis of the status the Corinthians aspired to. In a sense Paul's self-deprecation emulates that of the Christ who emptied himself of glory and submitted to death on the cross (Phil 2: 6-11).

This passage, deeply personal as it is, keeps the focus on the mystery to which Paul testifies. The power of God has been made known in human weakness, glory has been shown in the shame of the cross. The reading is a two-fold confession. It's a confession of faith made through a confession of human limitation. It calls for a delivery that is both heartfelt and faith-filled.

Gospel

The conveniences of modern life are a mixed blessing for hearers of God's word. For all their value in making life easy, they weaken the capacity of biblical images to strike us with their original power. That's the case with today's images, salt and light. Refrigeration diverts attention from the critical role of salt in the ancient world, not just as a preservative but also as a valuable commodity. And the artificial lighting we have at our fingertips dulls our appreciation of the candles and torches of past ages.

For all that, salt and light can still fire our imaginations. Salt, judiciously used, adds zest to food. It's easy but sobering to reflect on whether our discipleship has zest or whether it's bland and insipid. It's equally simple and challenging to wonder how well our lives radiate the light of the gospel. The prophet Isaiah has already told us what will light up the world – the works of justice and mercy. In the end these gospel images are meant to encourage, not discourage, us. They serve their purpose when they stir us to lively service.

Jesus' advice to put our light on display brings his counter-advice to mind. On Ash Wednesday he tells us to keep our prayer, almsgiving and fasting secret. Both commands in fact have the same purpose: "to give the praise to your Father in heaven". The NRSV renders the text inclusively.

Concluding 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.

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 IV, Roman Missal p 716)