

SUNDAY READINGS

READ AT HOME

Third Sunday of Lent

Year A

12 March 2023



Collect

O God, author of every mercy and of all goodness,
who in fasting, prayer and almsgiving
have shown us a remedy for sin,
look graciously on this confession of our lowliness,
that we, who are bowed down by our conscience,
may always be lifted up by your mercy.
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

There are no witnesses to Jesus' conversation with the Samaritan woman. He and she are alone at Jacob's well, away from the village in the heat of the day. The spareness of the scene makes Jesus' claim all the more telling. He has water to give, he tells her, that will become a "spring of water gushing up to eternal life" (Jn 4:14, NRSV) in those who drink it.

It's a different setting altogether when he cries out later in similar words, "Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink" (7:37-38, NRSV). This time Jesus is in a Jerusalem thronged with pilgrims for the feast of Tabernacles. It's "on the last day of the festival, the great day" that he declares this to all and sundry. Like the Samaritan woman, they too are told that "out of the believer's heart shall flow rivers of living water".

These wonderful promises of Jesus bring to mind many appealing texts about water, spirit and life in the psalms and prophets, such as Psalm 77/78, Ezekiel 47:1-12, Isaiah 44:3 and Zechariah 14:8. They also offer a timely reminder at this stage of Lent, that it's the water flowing from Jesus' pierced side that signifies the outpouring of the Spirit upon his disciples.

A reading from the book of Exodus 17:3–7

Tormented by thirst, the people complained against Moses. ‘Why did you bring us out of Egypt?’ they said. ‘Was it so that I should die of thirst, my children too, and my cattle?’ Moses appealed to the Lord. ‘How am I to deal with this people?’ he said. ‘A little more and they will stone me!’ The Lord said to Moses, ‘Take with you some of the elders of Israel and move on to the forefront of the people; take in your hand the staff with which you struck the river, and go. I shall be standing before you there on the rock, at Horeb. You must strike the rock, and water will flow from it for the people to drink.’ This is what Moses did, in the sight of the elders of Israel. The place was named Massah and Meribah because of the grumbling of the sons of Israel and because they put the Lord to the test by saying, ‘Is the Lord with us, or not?’

Responsorial Psalm Ps 94:1–2, 6–9

R. If today you hear his voice,
harden not your hearts.

Come, ring out our joy to the Lord;
hail the rock who saves us.
Let us come before him, giving thanks,
with songs let us hail the Lord. **R.**

Come in; let us bow and bend low;
let us kneel before the God who made us
for he is our God and we
the people who belong to his pasture,
the flock that is led by his hand. **R.**

O that today you would listen to his voice!
‘Harden not your hearts as at Meribah,
as on that day at Massah in the desert
when your fathers put me to the test;
when they tried me, though they saw my work.’ **R.**

A reading from the letter of St Paul to the Romans 5:1–2, 5–8

Through our Lord Jesus Christ by faith we are judged righteous and at peace with God, since it is by faith and through Jesus that we have entered this state of grace in which we can boast about looking forward to God’s glory. This hope is not deceptive, because the love of God has been poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit which has been given us. We were still helpless when at his appointed moment Christ died for sinful men. It is not easy to die even for a good man – though of course for someone really worthy, a man might be prepared to die – but what proves that God loves us is that Christ died for us while we were still sinners.

First Reading

Today’s story may be ancient, but there’s a perennial human theme to it. Having claimed their freedom from Egyptian oppression, but now faced with the hardship of thirst on the desert, the Israelites pine for the “good old days”. “Why did you bring us out of Egypt?” they ask Moses. Earlier complaints about hunger and thirst had won them manna and drinkable water (15:25; 16:4), but these successes were not enough to rid them of nostalgia for the predictability of their enslaved life.

Once more their complaints bear fruit. With the rod that he had used to divide the Red Sea, Moses strikes the rock and water flows. The question the people have been asking – “Is the Lord with us or not?” – is plainly answered. The incident was striking enough to find its way into the psalms, as we will see, and from there into the letter to the Hebrews (3:7).

The story is well told. The problem is raised, a remedy sought, and an answer given. There’s plenty of emotive energy carrying the action forward. The people’s complaint elicits Moses’ plea, and Moses’ plea prompts the Lord’s authoritative response. Divine exasperation is implied in the reference to putting God to the test. Good story-telling skills will enable readers to engage the assembly well in this drama.

Responsorial Psalm

Psalm 94/95 is one of four psalms which explicitly refer to the incident described in the first reading (see also 77/78, 80/81 and 105/106). The people’s complaint at Meriba (meaning “contention”) and Massah (“testing”) seems to have become emblematic of Israel’s unwillingness to heed the word of God. The whole shadow side of their history – their refusal to listen and submit to God’s word – is summed up in this one episode. It’s even more succinctly expressed in the response: “If today you hear his voice, harden not your hearts”.

Given that the responsorial psalm opens with this admonition, it’s a surprise to find the first two stanzas are full of joyful praise. God is hailed as rock, as creator, and as shepherd. The people are called to honour their wonderful God with songs and gestures of reverence. The third stanza shifts the register from praise back to pleading and provides the text of the severely-worded response. This change of tone makes sense if the early part of the psalm served as a processional chant for entry to the temple, and the latter part as a stern call for the people to pay attention to a liturgy of the word.

The mood of the psalm thus oscillates between reproach and praise. Readers will do well to distinguish clearly between them by their tone of voice.

A reading from the holy Gospel according to John 4:5–16, 19–26, 39–42 (Short Form)

Jesus came to the Samaritan town called Sychar, near the land that Jacob gave to his son Joseph. Jacob's well is there and Jesus, tired by the journey, sat straight down by the well. It was about the sixth hour. When a Samaritan woman came to draw water, Jesus said to her, 'Give me a drink.' His disciples had gone into the town to buy food. The Samaritan woman said to him, 'What? You are a Jew and you ask me, a Samaritan, for a drink?' – Jews, in fact, do not associate with Samaritans. Jesus replied:

'If you only knew what God is offering
and who it is that is saying to you:
Give me a drink,
you would have been the one to ask,
and he would have given you living water.'

'You have no bucket, sir,' she answered 'and the well is deep: how could you get this living water? Are you a greater man than our father Jacob who gave us this well and drank from it himself with his sons and his cattle?' Jesus replied:

'Whoever drinks this water
will get thirsty again;
but anyone who drinks the water that I shall give
will never be thirsty again:
the water that I shall give
will turn into a spring inside him, welling up to
eternal life.'

'Sir,' said the woman 'give me some of that water, so that I may never get thirsty and never have to come here again to draw water. I see you are a prophet, sir. Our fathers worshipped on this mountain, while you say that Jerusalem is the place where one ought to worship.' Jesus said:

'Believe me, woman, the hour is coming
when you will worship the Father
neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem.
You worship what you do not know;
we worship what we do know;
for salvation comes from the Jews.
But the hour will come - in fact it is here already -
when true worshippers will worship the Father
in spirit and truth:
that is the kind of worshipper the Father wants.
God is spirit,
and those who worship
must worship in spirit and truth.'

The woman said to him, 'I know that Messiah – that is, Christ – is coming; and when he comes he will tell us everything.' 'I who am speaking to you,' said Jesus 'I am he.'

Many Samaritans of that town had believed in him on the strength of the woman's testimony when she said, 'He told me all I have ever done', so, when the Samaritans came up to him, they begged him to stay with them. He stayed for two days, and when he spoke to them many more came to believe; and they said to the woman, 'Now we no longer believe because of what you told us; we have heard him ourselves and we know that he really is the saviour of the world.'

Second Reading

This passage from Paul could be restated in a sequence like this. At the appointed time in the divine plan, and in proof of God's love for us, Christ died for helpless sinners. Sinners who come to faith in Christ are brought into right relationship with God. The Holy Spirit fills their hearts with divine love and assures them of the hope of eternal glory.

Paul, as we well know, doesn't express himself quite so simply. He has so many thoughts jostling in his head that they often tumble out untidily. Driving his argument here and throughout the letter to the Romans is his conviction that we are saved by faith. Sinners cannot save themselves; salvation is God's work. It's pure grace because God's love embraces us in all our unloveliness, in our sin.

It would be a useful exercise for readers to write their own summary of the text, once they have read it, reflected on it and analysed it. If the assembly is led to the insight that we are put at rights with God by God's gracious love for us in Christ, readers will have done their job well. As usual, the NRSV renders the text inclusively.

Gospel

Ministers of today's gospel are faced with a difficult choice. Either they proclaim the very long story of the Samaritan woman's encounter with Jesus in full, complete with apparent digressions on the place of worship and on the harvest of life, or they opt for the somewhat abbreviated version which omits some key elements such as her evangelising mission to the villagers.

The shorter version still draws us into the woman's journey of faith. Jesus leads her step by step from each misunderstanding to new understanding. Her idea of water evolves: well water becomes running water and finally the spring-water of the Spirit. Her insights into Jesus likewise progress. She identifies him successively as an unfriendly Jew, as "sir," as a prophet, and finally as the Messiah, before he declares himself to her as "I am he". Her apparent alienation from the village folk is eventually replaced by their solidarity in faith with her.

The woman's journey of faith has been beautifully dramatised by John. It will have special resonance in communities where there are candidates (the "elect") in the final weeks of preparation for initiation at the Paschal Vigil. Even if the shorter text is chosen, the story needs telling with freshness, enthusiasm, sensitivity, and a keen understanding of its dynamic development if the assembly's attention is to be held. This is all the more so with the longer version.

Some communities may decide that the story is better told when there's a variety of voices taking the roles of narrator, the woman, Jesus and others. This will only be the case if each of the readers is capable of quality proclamation and all have rehearsed together to become an effective ensemble.

Concluding Prayer

Prayer over the People (Third Sunday of Lent)

Direct, O Lord, we pray, the hearts of your faithful,
and in your kindness grant your servants this grace:
that, abiding in the love of you and their neighbour,
they may fulfil the whole of your commands.
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 Prayer over the People for the Third Sunday of Lent,
Roman Missal p. 262.)