

SUNDAY READINGS

READ AT HOME

Nineteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Year A

13 August 2023



Collect

Almighty ever-living God,
whom, taught by the Holy Spirit,
we dare to call our Father,
bring, we pray, to perfection in our hearts
the spirit of adoption as your sons and daughters,
that we may merit to enter into the inheritance
which you have promised.
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

We only hear the beginning and end of Paul's pain-ridden effort in Romans to make sense of his own people's unbelief in Christ. Here are a few things that biblical scholar N.T. Wright has to say about chapters 9–11. "[It] is one of the most careful and sustained arguments anywhere in Paul's letters. . . At the vital point he insists, as he had done in synagogues from Antioch to Corinth, that the goal of the Torah, the aim and purpose of the whole narrative was the Messiah. . . This, then, is Israel's story, with Israel's Messiah as its climax. *It is not, and never can be, a story cut loose from the story of Israel, as Marcion would argue later on and as perhaps some in Rome were already supposing. . . Paul here, we remember, is writing to head off any suggestion in the Roman Church that it's now time for the followers of Jesus to cut loose from their Jewish context and see themselves as simply a Gentile community*" (*Paul: A Biography*, NY: HarperCollins, 2018, 331-33).

A reading from the first book of the Kings

19:9, 11–13

When Elijah reached Horeb, the mountain of God, he went into the cave and spent the night in it. Then he was told, 'Go out and stand on the mountain before the Lord.' Then the Lord himself went by. There came a mighty wind, so strong it tore the mountains and shattered the rocks before the Lord. But the Lord was not in the wind. After the wind came an earthquake. But the Lord was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake came a fire. But the Lord was not in the fire. And after the fire there came the sound of a gentle breeze. And when Elijah heard this, he covered his face with his cloak and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave.

Responsorial Psalm

Ps 84:9–14

R. Lord, show us your mercy and love,
and grant us your salvation.

I will hear what the Lord God has to say,
a voice that speaks of peace.
His help is near for those who fear him
and his glory will dwell in our land. **R.**

Mercy and faithfulness have met;
justice and peace have embraced.
Faithfulness shall spring from the earth
and justice look down from heaven. **R.**

The Lord will make us prosper
and our earth shall yield its fruit.
Justice shall march before him
and peace shall follow his steps. **R.**

First Reading

The story of God's revelation to Elijah on Mt Horeb (Sinai) has a number of similarities to and differences from that of Moses' earlier encounter with God (Exodus 19:16-25). Both events occur on the holy mountain. In each case there are powerful natural phenomena such as thunder, lightning, earthquakes and wind. In Moses' case these were a medium of God's communication, but the author of Elijah's story is at pains to declare that God was not in them. Nor does the writer go on to claim that God was in the ensuing "sound of sheer silence" (NRSV).

On another occasion Moses was instructed to hide in a cleft of a rock so that he would be shielded from the divine glory as God passed by; he would only see God's back (Ex 34:21-23). Likewise, Elijah stands at the entrance to the cave where he had spent the night and covers his face with his cloak. In company with Moses, he hears the divine voice but does not see God. The Lord speaks to Elijah both before (19:9) and after (19:13) this display of nature, asking him what he's doing there. Elijah's reply is the same both times, implying that he was unchanged by what he had witnessed. And whatever contemplative note is struck by the image of "sheer silence" or the "sound of a gentle breeze" (JB), it is quickly dispelled by God's command to Elijah to anoint kings who would put the followers of Baal to the sword (19:17). The episode remains mysterious and open to interpretation. As it's recounted, it paints a dramatic picture of the powers of nature in full force, culminating in the surprise of silence and stillness. Readers should convey the energy of the elements before pausing and demonstrably slowing down for the contrasting conclusion.

Responsorial Psalm

Elijah's mission of restoring Israel's fidelity to their covenant with God had no lasting success. Centuries later, all seemed utterly lost in the catastrophe of the Babylonian conquest. Hope revived when the exiles were allowed to return home, but their situation was still fraught. Psalm 84/85 seems to fit with this period of struggle. It is a heartfelt plea for God's help and forgiveness on the basis of what God did for them in the past. However, the acute distress felt by the people is not at all evident in the final section of the psalm, the verses of which form today's responsorial psalm.

The response is a request for God's assistance. In the full psalm it is an anguished cry born of desperation, but, used here in combination with verses that are hope-filled and confident, the response has a trustful tone. This responsorial psalm brings together the personal – "I will hear" – and the communal – "The Lord will make us prosper". Memory and hope and both in play, as are confessions of faith in God's goodness.

The vocabulary is wholly encouraging. There's a litany of sympathetic words like "mercy," "love," "salvation," "peace," "faithfulness" and "justice". As a vote of confidence in God's covenant love, the psalm should be a joy for readers to proclaim. After taking care with the two-line response, they have verses to pray that are in standard four-line form and familiar language.

A reading from the letter of St Paul to the Romans

9:1–5

What I want to say is no pretence; I say it in union with Christ – it is the truth – my conscience in union with the Holy Spirit assures me of it too. What I want to say is this: my sorrow is so great, my mental anguish so endless, I would willingly be condemned and be cut off from Christ if it could help my brothers of Israel, my own flesh and blood. They were adopted as sons, they were given the glory and the covenants; the Law and the ritual were drawn up for them, and the promises were made to them. They are descended from the patriarchs and from their flesh and blood came Christ who is above all, God for ever blessed! Amen.

A reading from the holy Gospel according to Matthew

14:22–33

Jesus made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side while he would send the crowds away. After sending the crowds away he went up into the hills by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, while the boat, by now far out on the lake, was battling with a heavy sea, for there was a head-wind. In the fourth watch of the night he went towards them, walking on the lake, and when the disciples saw him walking on the lake they were terrified. 'It is a ghost' they said, and cried out in fear. But at once Jesus called out to them, saying 'Courage! It is I! Do not be afraid.' It was Peter who answered. 'Lord', he said 'if it is you, tell me to come to you across the water.' 'Come' said Jesus. Then Peter got out of the boat and started walking towards Jesus across the water, but as soon as he felt the force of the wind, he took fright and began to sink. 'Lord! Save me!' he cried. Jesus put out his hand at once and held him. 'Man of little faith,' he said 'why did you doubt?' And as they got into the boat the wind dropped. The men in the boat bowed down before him and said, 'Truly, you are the Son of God.'

Second Reading

Having resoundingly asserted that no matter what, nothing can separate us from "the love of God made visible in Christ Jesus" (8:39), Paul now begins a long (three-chapter) struggle to make sense of his own people's failure to come to faith in Christ. It's an issue of intense importance to him; that's made plain by his invocation of conscience, Christ and the Holy Spirit at the outset.

He writes of his great sorrow and endless mental anguish, even going to the extreme of offering to forfeit his own bond with Christ if that would save his people. It's notable that he calls them his "brothers". Paul does not see himself as being "converted" to Christianity but as having discovered Christ as the fulfilment of Israel's hopes. He lists the blessings they had received: adoption as God's own, the Law, their rites, the patriarchs and the promises.

It's not simply the enigma of Israel's blindness, it's also a question of God's fidelity. Has God abandoned his people and withdrawn the blessings given to Israel? Paul wrestles with these issues at length, but the lectionary offers us no more than this brief introduction and, next Sunday, the conclusion he comes to.

This is a challenging reading because it plunges listeners into Paul's pain without warning and without presenting a clear statement of the issue. All we learn is that Paul wants to help his "own flesh and blood" who have been blessed with so much. Readers will need to study this text very closely and master it if they are to proclaim it intelligibly, as well as with the passion it deserves.

Gospel

In common with Mark and John (but not with Luke), Matthew follows the feeding of the crowd with the story of Jesus' walking on the water. Matthew alone of the four evangelists includes Peter's adventure in this episode. How many of the disciples in the boat were fishermen isn't made clear, but all aboard would have been heirs to the biblical view of sea waters as a potent symbol of chaos. Battling a headwind and heavy seas, it's no wonder the appearance of a ghostly figure provoked fear in the disciples.

Jesus' authoritative directive to them not to fear is matched with his profound assertion "It is I," evoking the name "I am" with which God identified himself to Moses on the holy mountain (Ex 3:14). Some might even see in this an allusion to God's all-powerful word bringing order to the primeval stuff of the universe in the creation story that opens the whole Bible. Matthew's account of Peter's impulsive action and subsequent loss of confidence paves the way for his foolish claims at the Last Supper and the denials that followed. In neither case does Jesus reject him.

Matthew rounds out the story with a resounding confession of faith from the disciples, "Truly, you are the Son of God". There could not be more of a contrast with what Mark has to say: "They were utterly and completely dumbfounded . . . their minds were closed" (6:52). Matthew's story serves as an exhortation for the early Church, symbolised by the boat, to remain steadfast in faith.

This is a colourful and eventful story for ministers of the word to proclaim. It calls for strength of conviction and an appropriate degree of drama.

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)