

SUNDAY READINGS

READ AT HOME

Twentieth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Year A

20 August 2023



Collect

O God, who have prepared for those who love you
good things which no eye can see,
fill our hearts, we pray, with the warmth of your love,
so that, loving you in all things and above all things,
we may attain your promises,
which surpass every human desire.
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

Some twenty years ago, the Pontifical Biblical Commission in Rome published an important document entitled “The Jewish People and Their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible”. Part of it is devoted to what Paul had to say about his ancestral people. Here’s a tiny part relating to what we are reading from Romans:

“The resistance mounted by the majority of Jews to the Christian preaching produced in Paul's heart ‘great sorrow and unceasing anguish’ (Rm 9:2). . . His afflictions and suffering forced him to search for a solution: in three lengthy chapters (Rm 9-11), he goes to the heart of the problem, or rather the mystery, of Israel's place in God's plan, in the light of Christ and of the scriptures, without giving up until he is able to conclude: ‘and so all Israel will be saved’ (Rm 11:26). These three chapters in the Letter to the Romans constitute the most profound reflection in the whole of the New Testament on Jews who do not believe in Jesus. . . In the final analysis, God's plan for Israel is entirely positive: ‘their stumbling means riches for the world’, ‘how much more will their full inclusion mean?’ (11:12). They are assured of a covenant of mercy by God (11:27,31)”. (#79)

A reading from the prophet Isaiah 56:1, 6–7

Thus says the Lord: Have a care for justice, act with integrity, for soon my salvation will come and my integrity be manifest.

Foreigners who have attached themselves to the Lord to serve him and to love his name and be his servants – all who observe the sabbath, not profaning it, and cling to my covenant – these I will bring to my holy mountain. I will make them joyful in my house of prayer. Their holocausts and their sacrifices will be accepted on my altar, for my house will be called a house of prayer for all the peoples.

First Reading

The setting for the last eleven chapters of Isaiah appears to be the return of the exiles from Babylon to Jerusalem. It may be that they brought back with them a rigorous view of their identity, one that required separation and distinction from the local inhabitants. By contrast, the prophet presents an inclusive perspective.

To begin with, what matters is that all have a care for justice and act with integrity. Furthermore, foreigners who love and serve the God of Israel and who uphold the sabbath and the covenant are welcome in the house of God. They may offer sacrifice and pray joyfully there, for it “will be called a house of prayer for all peoples”. Jesus will cite this text when he cleanses the Temple (Mt 21:13; Mk 11:17).

Differing views about Israel’s identity are plain to see in the scriptures. They oscillate between strict separation from other peoples and a benign openness towards them. It’s the latter that’s on display today. This reading conveys a spirit of hospitality and welcome, and this is how it should be proclaimed.

Responsorial Psalm Ps 66:2–3, 5–6, 8

R. O God, let all the nations praise you!

O God, be gracious and bless us
and let your face shed its light upon us.
So will your ways be known upon earth
and all nations learn your saving help. **R.**

Let the nations be glad and exult
for you rule the world with justice.
With fairness you rule the peoples,
you guide the nations on earth. **R.**

Let the peoples praise you, O God;
let all the peoples praise you.
May God still give us his blessing
till the ends of the earth revere him. **R.**

Responsorial Psalm

The response to the psalm – “O God, let all the nations praise you!” – forges an immediate connection with the universalism of the first reading. In essence, Psalm 66/67 is a prayer for God’s blessings of saving love, justice and prosperity to be maintained so that all peoples would join Israel in singing God’s praise. The three stanzas are addressed directly to God, except for the last two lines. These come from the final verse of the original psalm which announces a bountiful harvest and leads to this indirect petition.

The way the responsorial psalm has been formed obscures the symmetrical structure of Psalm 66/67, but still maintains its spirit and the repetitive character of Hebrew poetry. There’s multiple mention of “nations” and “peoples,” as well as other pairings such as “justice” and “fairness”. Many of the psalms revel in the use of synonyms to highlight key themes in Israel’s faith. Whole phrases are also commonly repeated with variations on the theme.

Clearly this psalm is a joyous and celebratory prayer. Apart from the slightly strange transition to the concluding lines, it presents no difficulties for the reader. It is a lively confession of faith and praise which invites reader and assembly alike to enjoy its jubilant spirit.

A reading from the letter of St Paul to the Romans

11:13–15, 29–32

Let me tell you pagans this: I have been sent to the pagans as their apostle, and I am proud of being sent, but the purpose of it is to make my own people envious of you, and in this way save some of them. Since their rejection meant the reconciliation of the world, do you know what their admission will mean? Nothing less than a resurrection from the dead! God never takes back his gifts or revokes his choice.

Just as you changed from being disobedient to God, and now enjoy mercy because of their disobedience, so those who are disobedient now – and only because of the mercy shown to you – will also enjoy mercy eventually. God has imprisoned all men in their own disobedience only to show mercy to all mankind.

A reading from the holy Gospel according to Matthew

15:21–28

Jesus left Gennesaret and withdrew to the region of Tyre and Sidon. Then out came a Canaanite woman from that district and started shouting, 'Sir, Son of David, take pity on me. My daughter is tormented by a devil.' But he answered her not a word. And his disciples went and pleaded with him. 'Give her what she wants,' they said 'because she is shouting after us.' He said in reply, 'I was sent only to the lost sheep of the House of Israel.' But the woman had come up and was kneeling at his feet. 'Lord,' she said 'help me.' He replied, 'It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the house-dogs.' She retorted, 'Ah yes, sir; but even house-dogs can eat the scraps that fall from their master's table.' Then Jesus answered her, 'Woman, you have great faith. Let your wish be granted.' And from that moment her daughter was well again.

Second Reading

Regular readers will know that the second reading is independent of the others. In brief, the gospel is the anchor text. The first reading is chosen for its association with the gospel (not always immediately obvious), and the psalm complements the first reading. The second reading is an ordered extract from a non-gospel New Testament writing. It may have no direct connection with the other readings.

That's not the case today. In the first reading, Isaiah endorses Israel's acceptance of foreign believers. The psalmist prays that God's blessings for Israel would inspire all nations to praise God. The gospel tells the story of a foreign woman's faith in Jesus. In the same vein, the second reading deals with the issue of Israel and the nations.

Paul is bringing to conclusion his monumental struggle to make sense of Israel's failure to believe in Jesus. Their rejection of him raised two critical questions: had God proved unfaithful to Israel, and had Israel forfeited its status as God's covenanted people? Paul's answer provides a mirror image of the psalm. The success of his mission to the pagans was meant to provoke his own ancestral people to jealousy and bring them ultimately to faith in Christ. In this case, it is not the Jews who will embrace the pagans, but the reverse. God had neither revoked the ancient covenant, nor was Israel lost. "God never takes back his gifts," Paul wrote, and Israel "will also enjoy mercy eventually". This would be "nothing less than a resurrection from the dead!"

The reading reflects the personal debate Paul has been having in his own mind. It's as if he's in court mounting the case, developing the argument point by point. This makes it a challenging text for readers to proclaim and for the assembly to follow. It warrants close study and several readings in preparation. The better grasp readers have of Paul's complex logic, the more likely it is that their proclamation will be readily understood by the assembly. A deliberate pace, careful pausing and well-chosen stress on the key assertions will serve God's people well. As usual, the NRSV employs inclusive language.

Gospel

In spite of Luke's gospel having the reputation of bringing women to the fore, he does not include Mark and Matthew's striking story of the Canaanite woman who gets the better of Jesus. It's a unique episode in the gospel tradition. There are interesting differences in the way these two evangelists recount the event. Matthew has the woman come out from pagan territory to Jesus, whereas Mark has Jesus enter a house in the district. Mark doesn't report the woman's initial plea, whereas Matthew has the woman profess enough faith in Jesus to address him as "Sir, Son of David".

In Matthew, the disciples get involved, if only in order to get rid of her. Jesus' reply to them, that he "was sent only to the lost sheep of the House of Israel," is not recorded by Mark. The woman is not daunted by Jesus' disdain. She now addresses Jesus as "Lord". The spirited exchange that follows prompts Jesus to acknowledge her "great faith" and grant her wish forthwith.

This feisty woman foreshadows the courage and steadfastness of the women who stood at the foot of the cross and became the first witnesses of the resurrection. Her triumph in securing the healing of her daughter is a hint of the success of the Gentile mission still to come. This story is as dramatic as it is short. The mix of narrative with the cut and thrust of the conversation makes for a lively text for ministers of the word to deliver.

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)

