

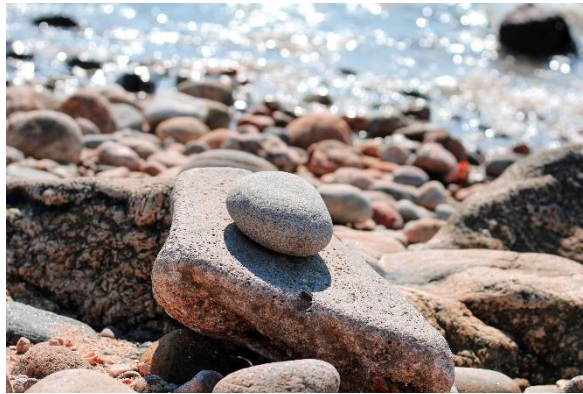
SUNDAY READINGS

READ AT HOME

Twenty-First Sunday in Ordinary Time

Year A

27 August 2023



Collect

O God, who cause the minds of the faithful
to unite in a single purpose,
grant your people to love what you command
and to desire what you promise,
that, amid the uncertainties of this world,
our hearts may be fixed on that place
where true gladness is found.
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

“But you,” Jesus said, “who do you say I am?” Peter, impulsive as ever, dares to say, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God”. We make the same profession whenever we recite the creed, but more out of habit than with audacity. The Australian Jesuit poet and preacher Peter Steele had this to say in a homily at the turn of the millennium:

“To say that we believe in Christ our Lord, who is God’s only Son and his last word, is to say that we will never give up trying to love those whom God loves into being, and into being the siblings of Christ.

“If we are frank, this can seem an impossible agenda, when we look at some of ‘the others,’ and when we look at ourselves. . . There is a way for each of us, however dismayed or dejected or disarrayed we may be, a way for each of us to rise to courage and generosity; a way for today – and that is truly Christ’s way, is truly Christ *being* our way. And he is never more ‘Our Lord’ than when he is being that way”
(*Bread for the Journey*, Melbourne: David Lovell, 2002, 247).

A reading from the prophet Isaiah 22:19–23

Thus says the Lord of hosts to Shebna,
the master of the palace:

I dismiss you from your office,
I remove you from your post,
and the same day I call on my servant
Eliakim son of Hilkiah.
I invest him with your robe,
gird him with your sash,
entrust him with your authority;
and he shall be a father
to the inhabitants of Jerusalem
and to the House of Judah.
I place the key of the House of David
on his shoulder;
should he open, no one shall close,
should he close, no one shall open.
I drive him like a peg
into a firm place;
he will become a throne of glory
for his father's house.

First Reading

This enigmatic oracle from the prophet Isaiah appears to relate to the reign of King Hezekiah in Judah some seven hundred years before the birth of Christ. While Hezekiah was a significant reformer and an active player in the geo-political games of the day, this oracle relates to internal palace affairs.

It seems that the master of the palace, Shebna, had failed in his duties. He is therefore summarily dismissed. The violent language describing his fate – he's to be "wound up into a ball" and "hurled into an immense country" where he will die – has been omitted from the lectionary. The bulk of the passage is devoted to the investiture of his replacement, Eliakim, who later proved to be a disappointment.

Eliakim's installation is described in grandly poetic terms – impressive garb, extensive authority and the promise of glory. The justification for the choice of this obscure text comes into view when we hear reference made to the key of the kingdom and Eliakim's power to open and close. We will be reminded of this when we get to today's gospel reading.

Except for those who are biblically literate, this reading will not be readily understood. As usual, the reader's task is not to offer explanations, but to proclaim the text as intelligibly as possible. It proceeds by way of short statements that drive the action forward and call for clear and strong delivery.

Responsorial Psalm Ps 137:1–3, 6, 8

R. Lord, your love is eternal;
do not forsake the work of your hands.
I thank you, Lord, with all my heart,
you have heard the words of my mouth.
Before the angels I will bless you,
I will adore before your holy temple. **R.**
I thank you for your faithfulness and love
which excel all we ever knew of you.
On the day I called, you answered;
you increased the strength of my soul. **R.**
The Lord is high yet he looks on the lowly
and the haughty he knows from afar.
Your love, O Lord, is eternal,
discard not the work of your hands. **R.**

Responsorial Psalm

After Isaiah's oracle dealing with the inner workings of the king's palace, the responsorial psalm brings us out into boundless space. Psalm 137/138 is a sunny hymn of praise and thanksgiving to God. There are slight allusions to the fact that the psalmist's thankfulness may arise from deliverance of some sort, such as "On the day I called, you answered," but if so, the problem is not dwelt on. The focus is on God's outstanding qualities.

God listens to prayer, is faithful and loving, gives strength, and attends to the lowly. God's goodness encompasses heaven and earth, angels and humankind, time and eternity. In praising God lavishly, the psalmist acknowledges our complete dependence on divine bounty, hence the plea, "do not forsake the work of your hands".

Provided they announce the two-line response carefully, making sure the assembly hears it in full before responding, readers have every reason to enjoy leading everyone through this pleasing prayer.

**A reading from the letter of St Paul
to the Romans**

11:33–36

How rich are the depths of God – how deep his wisdom and knowledge – and how impossible to penetrate his motives or understand his methods! Who could ever know the mind of the Lord? Who could ever be his counsellor? Who could ever give him anything or lend him anything? All that exists comes from him; all is by him and for him. To him be glory for ever! Amen.

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

16:13–20

When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi he put this question to his disciples, 'Who do people say the Son of Man is?' And they said, 'Some say he is John the Baptist, some Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.' 'But you,' he said, 'who do you say I am?' Then Simon Peter spoke up, 'You are the Christ,' he said, 'the Son of the living God.' Jesus replied, 'Simon son of Jonah, you are a happy man! Because it was not flesh and blood that revealed this to you but my Father in heaven. So I now say to you: You are Peter and on this rock I will build my Church. And the gates of the underworld can never hold out against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth shall be considered bound in heaven; whatever you loose on earth shall be considered loosed in heaven.' Then he gave the disciples strict orders not to tell anyone that he was the Christ.

Second Reading

After wrestling for three chapters with the vexed issue of Jewish rejection of Jesus, it's no wonder that Paul bursts into praise. He had come to a conclusion of sorts, as we heard last Sunday. As he saw it, the Gentiles' faith in Jesus was intended to make Jews jealous of what they were missing. They remained within the wide arc of God's mercy and would be saved in God's good time.

Nonetheless the whole situation remained humanly inexplicable. All that Paul can do is praise God for the mystery of it all. God's wisdom and knowledge are beyond human comprehension, as the prophet Isaiah had long since acknowledged (40:13) and Job confessed. God remains everlastingly transcendent and sovereign, encompassing all that is. When human understanding is brought to its limits, there is nothing left to do but confess God's glory.

This is a precious jewel of a text. It is suffused with wonder, awe and admiration. It deserves to be proclaimed with deep faith and respect.

Gospel

Since the lectionary omits the intervening events that Matthew recounts, we find Jesus again in an alien place. Caesarea Philippi may not be as remote as the homeland of the Canaanite woman in last Sunday's gospel, but it's still a long way from Galilee in geographic, political and religious terms. It's striking, therefore, that Peter's confession of faith should occur in a place so powerfully associated with pagan rites and imperial power.

Mark and Luke are content to record that Peter declared Jesus to be the Messiah. Matthew goes much further. He has Peter confess that Jesus is "the Son of the living God". This full-blown affirmation of Jesus' divine status may well have found its way here from the post-resurrection narratives. The only time the Greek word "ekklesia" is used in the four gospels is at this point and again a little later on (Mt 18:17). Here it is translated as "Church," there as "community".

The nature and extent of the authority Jesus conferred on Peter in this episode remains a matter of dispute both within and between the Christian Churches, but two things are clear. Peter is singled out for leadership, and the community is assured of Jesus' protective power. Plainly this is a significant event in the gospel story. As well-known as it is, the reading warrants a delivery that sounds fresh and lively and that does justice to the consequential exchange that takes place between Jesus and Peter.

Concluding Blessing

May the Lord bless us and keep us.

Amen.

May he let his face shine upon us
and show us his mercy.

Amen.

May he turn his countenance towards us
and give us his peace.

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 I, Roman Missal p 714)