

SUNDAY READINGS

READ AT HOME

Twenty-Third Sunday in Ordinary Time

Year A

10 September 2023



Collect

O God, by whom we are redeemed and receive adoption,
look graciously upon your beloved sons and daughters,
that those who believe in Christ
may receive true freedom
and an everlasting inheritance.
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

Pope Francis issued his encyclical, *Fratelli tutti* (On Fraternity and Social Friendship), on the eve of his namesake's feast in October 2020. It's a lengthy exposition of the neighbourly love about which Paul reminds the Romans today. Here's an introductory paragraph (#8):

"It is my desire that, in this our time, by acknowledging the dignity of each human person, we can contribute to the rebirth of a universal aspiration to fraternity. Fraternity between all men and women. Here we have a splendid secret that shows us how to dream and to turn our life into a wonderful adventure. No one can face life in isolation... We need a community that supports and helps us, in which we can help one another to keep looking ahead. How important it is to dream together... By ourselves, we risk seeing mirages, things that are not there. Dreams, on the other hand, are built together. Let us dream, then, as a single human family, as fellow travellers sharing the same flesh, as children of the same earth which is our common home, each of us bringing the richness of his or her beliefs and convictions, each of us with his or her own voice, brothers and sisters all".

A reading from the prophet Ezekiel 33:7–9

The word of the Lord was addressed to me as follows, 'Son of man, I have appointed you as sentry to the House of Israel. When you hear a word from my mouth, warn them in my name. If I say to a wicked man: Wicked wretch, you are to die, and you do not speak to warn the wicked man to renounce his ways, then he shall die for his sin, but I will hold you responsible for his death. If, however, you do warn a wicked man to renounce his ways and repent, and he does not repent, then he shall die for his sin, but you yourself will have saved your life.'

Responsorial Psalm Ps 94:1–2, 6–9

R. O that today you would listen to 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.**

First Reading

Today's reading from the prophet Ezekiel echoes a passage heard much earlier in the book (3:16-21). It spells out his role and responsibilities as a prophet and also raises the question of individuals' moral responsibility. Ezekiel's mission is likened to that of a sentry. This image has connotations of being on the lookout for danger. The sentry's task is to watch out for the approach of enemies and to sound the alarm. In that sense it has rather negative connotations. It suggests that Ezekiel's mission is to warn of the dangerous consequences of infidelity to the covenant.

In the first place this puts the onus on Ezekiel to be faithful to his prophetic vocation. If he fails to warn a wicked person of God's judgement, and that person dies unrepentant, he himself will be counted responsible. If, on the other hand, he does alert someone to their wicked ways and that person refuses to repent, then only the sinner will suffer, not the prophet.

On the face of it, this is a sobering rather than an encouraging text. It raises, but does not resolve, issues such as the relationship between God's will and human freedom and between personal and collective responsibility. It also poses the difficult question of our responsibility to call wrong-doers to account, a thorny issue taken up in today's gospel.

This rather downbeat reading may not have immediate appeal, but readers must be faithful to its serious tone. The NRSV lectionary presents it in inclusive language.

Responsorial Psalm

Right from the start, the response to the psalm picks up the prophetic warning conveyed in the first reading. It lays down the gauntlet in no uncertain terms. It yokes together an appeal and a command. The psalmist summons everyone to heed God's voice and not harden their hearts.

This means there are awkward transitions in the praying of the responsorial psalm. The sombre response contrasts sharply with the summons to joyful praise and thanks with which Psalm 94/95 begins. The language suggests the psalm may have been a processional chant for entry to the place of worship. God is to be hailed as saviour, creator and shepherd. The unqualified festive tone of these opening verses is as sunny as the response is overcast.

Only the third stanza, a pleading lament, matches the response. The people's historic complaints on their way through the desert are recalled via the place names, Meribah and Massah (Ex 17:1-7). Nonetheless, this chastening memory does forge a link with the earlier verses, because it was at Massah that God proved to be "the rock who saves us". When the people, tormented by thirst, complained to Moses, he was instructed by God to strike the rock with his staff and water flowed from it.

Leaving that point of continuity aside, a likely explanation for the change of tone within the original psalm is that, once the people had happily entered the sanctuary, they were issued a stern warning to prepare them to listen to God's word. This supposition gives coherence to the psalm. Nonetheless, readers should respect the contrasting moods within the psalm and not smooth out the differences.

A reading from the letter of St Paul to the Romans

13:8–10

Avoid getting into debt, except the debt of mutual love. If you love your fellow men you have carried out your obligations. All the commandments: You shall not commit adultery, you shall not kill, you shall not steal, you shall not covet, and so on, are summed up in this single command: You must love your neighbour as yourself. Love is the one thing that cannot hurt your neighbour; that is why it is the answer to every one of the commandments.

A reading from the holy Gospel according to Matthew

18:15–20

Jesus said to his disciples: 'If your brother does something wrong, go and have it out with him alone, between your two selves. If he listens to you, you have won back your brother. If he does not listen, take one or two others along with you: the evidence of two or three witnesses is required to sustain any charge. But if he refuses to listen to these, report it to the community; and if he refuses to listen to the community, treat him like a pagan or a tax collector.

'I tell you solemnly, whatever you bind on earth shall be considered bound in heaven; whatever you loose on earth shall be considered loosed in heaven.

'I tell you solemnly once again, if two of you on earth agree to ask anything at all, it will be granted to you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three meet in my name, I shall be there with them.'

Second Reading

It seems a pity that the lectionary omits the remainder of Romans 12. There Paul spells out what he means by "offering your living bodies as a holy sacrifice". It's a beautiful sketch of the Christian life, akin to what he had written earlier to the Corinthian community. Also skipped over is the opening section of chapter 13, on obedience to civil authorities, including the obligation to pay taxes (13:7). Readers are recommended to read all this and ponder Paul's advice.

What we do have is a selection from things Jesus said when he was asked about the "first of all the commandments" (cf. Mk 12:28-34) and about what good deeds one must do to have eternal life (cf. Mt 19:16-22). The difference here is that Paul's focus is exclusively on love for one's neighbour. That is why the commandments he cites are those dealing with behaviour towards others, not those directed to God.

The reading covers familiar territory, but this should not tempt the reader into hurrying through the proclamation. The content may be well-known, but it remains core teaching for Christian believers and indeed for all who uphold the Golden Rule: treat others as you want them to treat you.

Gospel

The gospel writers, especially Mark, are unsparing of the faults and failures of Jesus' chosen disciples, not least in the hour of Jesus' greatest need. Luke is keen to highlight the transformation worked in them by the outpouring of the Spirit on Pentecost Day. He depicts the life of the first Jerusalem community in idyllic terms. But even he has to acknowledge breaches of these inspired ideals. Today's passage from Matthew testifies to the fact that early Christian communities had to develop procedures to deal with conflict and moral failure.

The three-step process – personal conversation with the offender, small group intervention and community engagement – is not peculiar to the Christian tradition. It has parallels in Greek philosophical writings and in the Essene community at Qumran. Notable, however, in this reading is the extension of the authority given to Peter (16:19) to the whole community. It's ironic that the final stage of the process, when all else fails, is to treat the person concerned "like a pagan or a tax collector" – after Jesus had gone out of his way to welcome tax collectors, and pagans had come to faith in Christ. Clearly the phrase is used in a conventional sense.

The final affirmation of Jesus' abiding presence seems to have no necessary connection with what precedes it, but it accords with Matthew's framing of his gospel in terms of Emmanuel, God-with-us (1:23 and 28:20). The reading may be divided into four sections – the disciplinary process, the authority of the community, the heavenly validation of petition, and the final assertion of Jesus' abiding presence. Each of these should be clearly distinguished in the proclamation.

Concluding Blessing

May almighty God bless us in his kindness
and pour out saving wisdom upon us.

Amen.

May he nourish us always with the teachings of the faith
and make us persevere in holy deeds.

Amen.

May he turn our steps towards himself
and show us the path of charity and 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 II, Roman Missal p 715.)