

SUNDAY READINGS

READ AT HOME

Twenty-Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Year A

17 September 2023



Collect

Look upon us, O God,
Creator and ruler of all things,
and, that we may feel the working of your mercy,
grant that we may serve you with all our heart.
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

What makes forgiveness of others possible and necessary, the gospel parable implies, is a vivid awareness of the infinite mercy with which God enfolds us all. Etty Hillesum, a young Dutch Jewish woman who died in Auschwitz in 1943 at the age of 29, had every reason to be embittered, hateful and unforgiving against her captors, but was blessed with extraordinary insight into the world of grace. In a letter written a few months before her execution, she wrote:

“The misery here is quite terrible, and yet, late at night when the day has slunk away into the depths behind me, I often walk with a spring in my step along the barbed wire. And then time and again, it soars straight from my heart – I can’t help it, that’s just the way it is, like some elementary force – the feeling that life is glorious and magnificent, and that one day we shall be building a whole new world. Against every new outrage and every fresh horror, we shall put up one more piece of love and goodness, drawing strength from within ourselves. We may suffer, but we must not succumb”.

A reading from the book of Ecclesiasticus

27:30 – 28:7

Resentment and anger, these are foul things,
and both are found with the sinner.
He who exacts vengeance
will experience the vengeance of the Lord,
who keeps strict account of sin.
Forgive your neighbour the hurt he does you,
and when you pray, your sins will be forgiven.
If a man nurses anger against another,
can he then demand compassion from the Lord?
Showing no pity for a man like himself,
can he then plead for his own sins?
Mere creature of flesh, he cherishes resentment;
who will forgive him his sins?
Remember the last things, and stop hating,
remember dissolution and death,
and live by the commandments.
Remember the commandments,
and do not bear your neighbour ill-will;
remember the covenant of the Most High,
and overlook the offence.

Responsorial Psalm

Ps 102:1–4, 9–12

R. The Lord is kind and merciful;
slow to anger and rich in compassion.
My soul, give thanks to the Lord,
all my being, bless his holy name.
My soul, give thanks to the Lord
and never forget all his blessings. **R.**
It is he who forgives all your guilt,
who heals every one of your ills,
who redeems your life from the grave,
who crowns you with love and compassion. **R.**
His wrath will come to an end;
he will not be angry for ever.
He does not treat us according to our sins
nor repay us according to our faults. **R.**
For as the heavens are high above the earth
so strong is his love for those who fear him.
As far as the east is from the west
so far does he remove our sins. **R.**

First Reading

The book of Ecclesiasticus, or as it is more commonly called nowadays, the Wisdom of Ben Sirach (or just Sirach), was originally written in Hebrew less than 200 years before the birth of Jesus. It is a loosely organised collection of reflections and teachings on how to live wisely. It draws on Greek philosophical traditions but its primary source and influence is the Torah, God's word and law. Sirach's grandson translated it into Greek several decades later, bringing it even closer to New Testament times.

Neither the overall arrangement of topics nor the treatment of individual subjects is systematic. Its style is allusive and repetitive, as the author muses on his subject, allowing one thought to prompt another. That's evident in today's passage on anger, resentment and forgiveness. It presents observations based on real life experience and situates them in the framework of Israel's covenant faith. It has been chosen for its clear association with the parable Jesus tells in today's gospel, but it also brings to mind how we pray for forgiveness in the Lord's Prayer.

The reading is a series of two-line maxims. There is a thread of sorts joining them together, but each one deserves to be articulated distinctly so its message can be absorbed. The teaching does gather momentum as considerations of "the last things" and "dissolution and death" come into view. It finishes with remembrance of "the covenant of the Most High". This kind of literature is not well represented in the lectionary and is likely to be unfamiliar to many in the assembly. Thoughtful and moderately paced proclamation will serve the community well.

Responsorial Psalm

The responsorial psalm picks up on the first reading's concluding reference to "the Most High". It leaves behind the issue of neighbourly forgiveness and extols the mercy of God for the people of the covenant. Psalm 102/103 as a whole is a hymn of praise for God's blessings, forgiveness, love and compassion. It has incorporated much of Israel's core confession of faith found in Exodus 34:6 and elsewhere in the Old Testament. It's from this text that the response has been extracted.

The first stanza is the prayer of an individual giving thanks to God, the next two have a corporate focus, and the final one has a global reach. The key blessing that God bestows is that of forgiveness and healing. There is an implicit confession of sin in the third stanza, but it is embedded in a confession of faith in the divine mercy. The psalm complements the first reading by placing the forgiveness we owe to one another under the broad umbrella of God's unbounded forgiveness of us.

Readers will need to take the usual care when they announce the two-line response so it is heard and received in full before being repeated. Similarly, they will respect the poetic form of the psalm and not bleed the short lines into one another. Prayerful proclamation will draw the assembly into the psalmist's spirit of gratitude.

A reading from the letter of St Paul to the Romans

14:7–9

The life and death of each of us has its influence on others; if we live, we live for the Lord; and if we die, we die for the Lord, so that alive or dead we belong to the Lord. This explains why Christ both died and came to life, it was so that he might be Lord both of the dead and of the living.

A reading from the holy Gospel according to Matthew

18:21–35

Peter went up to Jesus and said, 'Lord, how often must I forgive my brother if he wrongs me? As often as seven times?' Jesus answered, 'Not seven, I tell you, but seventy-seven times.'

'And so the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who decided to settle his accounts with his servants. When the reckoning began, they brought him a man who owed ten thousand talents; but he had no means of paying, so his master gave orders that he should be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, to meet the debt. At this, the servant threw himself down at his master's feet. "Give me time," he said, "and I will pay the whole sum." And the servant's master felt so sorry for him that he let him go and cancelled the debt. Now as this servant went out, he happened to meet a fellow servant who owed him one hundred denarii; and he seized him by the throat and began to throttle him. "Pay what you owe me," he said. His fellow servant fell at his feet and implored him, saying, "Give me time and I will pay you." But the other would not agree; on the contrary, he had him thrown into prison till he should pay the debt. His fellow servants were deeply distressed when they saw what had happened, and they went to their master and reported the whole affair to him. Then the master sent for him. "You wicked servant," he said, "I cancelled all that debt of yours when you appealed to me. Were you not bound, then, to have pity on your fellow servant just as I had pity on you?" And in his anger the master handed him over to the torturers till he should pay all his debt. And that is how my heavenly Father will deal with you unless you each forgive your brother from your heart.'

Second Reading

We come to the sixteenth and final passage from Paul's letter to the Romans. No other letter gets such sustained exposure in the Sunday lectionary (1 Corinthians is spread out over three years), though the early extracts from Romans are rarely read because of the vagaries of the Lent-Easter season. Today's short text is all we hear from the final two chapters of the letter.

It may be familiar to some because it is one of the options for the Mass of Christian Burial. Paul's teaching on the interplay between one another's lives arises out of tensions between two groups in the community. There are those who are "strong," meaning people who exercise their freedom to eat anything they wish, and those who are "weak," meaning those who feel bound by dietary regulations. The latter abstain from meat (perhaps forbidden under Mosaic Law or sourced from pagan services) and eat only vegetables.

Paul is appealing for mutual respect between these groups. He puts their human differences in the overarching context of the death and resurrection of Christ. Believers caught up in the mystery of the Lord's dying and rising are freed from the drive to pass judgement on others. Their lives can be a positive influence on one another. It's fitting enough that our long journey through this magisterial letter should finish by confessing Christ as "Lord both of the dead and the living".

Gospel

Time and again in the gospel of John, instead of giving a direct answer to a question, Jesus responds obliquely in order to provoke deeper thought. In today's reading from Matthew, Jesus begins with an immediate and concrete answer to Peter. How often must we forgive? Seventy-seven times (or seventy times seven). The parable that follows, however, goes off in a different direction. Its message is that we who have received unlimited forgiveness from God must forgive others for their transgressions against us. There is no reference to how often.

There's great hyperbole in the figures that are cited. Jesus' reference to seventy-seven seems to allude to Lamech's bellicose declaration in Genesis 4:24 that he would exact seventy-seven-fold vengeance for harm done to him. In the parable, the sum owed by the first servant – ten thousand talents – is astronomical. The amount owed by the second, the equivalent of a hundred days' wages, is large enough for a labourer, but pales into complete insignificance by comparison with the first debt. Jesus feels free to use wild exaggeration to make his point.

The reading as a whole teaches two lessons. The first is that followers of Jesus should cultivate a lively consciousness of God's infinite mercy for them. The second is that they should complement this with a stance of constant forgiveness for others. It isn't a numbers game but the practice of a deeply-rooted habit of forgiveness. These two lessons are neatly encapsulated in the Lord's Prayer.

Concluding Blessing

May the God of all consolation order our days in his peace
and grant us the gifts of his blessing.

Amen.

May he free us always from every distress
and confirm our hearts in his love.

Amen.

So that on this life's journey
we may be effective in good works,
rich in the gifts of hope, faith and charity,
and may come happily to eternal life.

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 IV, Roman Missal p 716)