

SUNDAY READINGS

READ AT HOME

Twenty-Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Year A

1 October 2023



Collect

O God, who manifest your almighty power
above all by pardoning and showing mercy,
bestow, we pray, your grace abundantly upon us
and make those hastening to attain your promises
heirs to the treasures of heaven.
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

The issue of personal and collective responsibility for our actions is complex and controverted. The prophet Ezekiel's exclusive focus on individual responsibility makes sense as a sharp corrective to the Israelites who blamed the misfortune of the exile wholly and solely on the sins of their forebears. Neither extreme can satisfy us. We are acutely aware of being caught up in the fallout from the actions, attitudes and policies of earlier generations, just as we know that the choices we make in our personal lives have ramifications for others.

These are existential issues. To give but three examples of the way the individual and the corporate are intertwined: the dispossession of the Indigenous peoples of Australia, the perpetration and cover-up of child sexual abuse by Church personnel, and the poisoning of the earth's atmosphere by greenhouse gases. There are no easy answers as to our personal responsibility for historic wrongs, but denying them is no answer.

What is clear is that we must do our best to right the wrongs of the past and be willing to submit our present assumptions, aspirations and behaviour to scrutiny. This is not a descent into paralysing guilt, but an ascent to freedom. Nor is it a project we embark on alone, but a shared enterprise guided by the Spirit of wisdom and truth.

A reading from the prophet Ezekiel

18:25–28

The word of the Lord was addressed to me as follows: 'You object, "What the Lord does is unjust." Listen, you House of Israel: is what I do unjust? Is it not what you do that is unjust? When the upright man renounces his integrity to commit sin and dies because of this, he dies because of the evil that he himself has committed. When the sinner renounces sin to become law-abiding and honest, he deserves to live. He has chosen to renounce all his previous sins; he shall certainly live; he shall not die.'

First Reading

The prophet Ezekiel's message to the people of Israel about personal responsibility is better understood in the light of the opening and closing verses of the chapter. They are worth checking out (18:1-2.31-32). At the outset God accuses the exiles of blaming their suffering on the faults of their ancestors, exemplified in an ancient proverb.

Without this context, the short extract we hear today begins abruptly. The point is made in categorical terms. Good people who choose to sin must accept its deadly consequences, while sinners who repent will be blessed with life. Each individual is personally responsible for his or her choices. This stark declaration is put in broader context by the concluding verses of the chapter. The drama of human choice takes place under the umbrella of God's desire for humankind to live. The people to are told "make yourselves a new heart and a new spirit . . . Repent and live!"

Elsewhere in the scriptures there is recognition that the choices human beings make do impinge on others, whether their contemporaries or later generations. Only two Sundays ago we heard Paul say "The life and death of each of us has its influence on others" (Rom 14:7). Ezekiel's prophetic task is to react against the people's evasion of personal responsibility, hence the absolute stance he takes.

It is not the reader's role to offer such explanations but to proclaim the reading in all its forthrightness. It has all the weight of a judicial verdict and this should not be shielded away from. It does end on a positive note.

Responsorial Psalm

Ps 24:4–9

R. Remember your mercies, O Lord.

Lord, make me know your ways.

Lord, teach me your paths.

Make me walk in your truth, and teach me:
for you are God my saviour. **R.**

Remember your mercy, Lord,
and the love you have shown from of old.
Do not remember the sins of my youth.
In your love remember me,
because of your goodness, O Lord. **R.**

The Lord is good and upright.
He shows the path to those who stray,
he guides the humble in the right path;
he teaches his way to the poor. **R.**

Responsorial Psalm

It's fitting that Ezekiel's insistence on personal responsibility should be followed by a psalm that combines an individual's repentance with trust in God's forgiveness. Psalm 24/25 includes a personal admission of sin – "Do not remember the sins of my youth" – but is steadfastly focussed on God.

Each of the three verses has a character of its own. The first is a petition by the psalmist to be taught God's ways, with the repetition and variation that is a feature of Hebrew poetry. Words like "ways," "paths," and "walk" go hand in hand. The second is a confession of sin and a plea for God's mercy. The third is a confession of faith in God who "shows the path," "guides the humble," and "teaches his way".

In sum, the psalmist does not wallow in guilt, but consistently acclaims the goodness of God. The tone is set by the response and is maintained throughout. Noting the five-line second stanza, readers should find it easy enough to lead the assembly in this confident and positive prayer.

**A reading from the letter of
St Paul to the Philippians 2:1–11**

If our life in Christ means anything to you, if love can persuade at all, or the Spirit that we have in common, or any tenderness and sympathy, then be united in your convictions and united in your love, with a common purpose and a common mind. That is the one thing which would make me completely happy. There must be no competition among you, no conceit; but everybody is to be self-effacing. Always consider the other person to be better than yourself, so that nobody thinks of his own interests first but everybody thinks of other people's interests instead. In your minds you must be the same as Christ Jesus:

[His state was divine,
yet he did not cling
to his equality with God
but emptied himself
to assume the condition of a slave,
and became as men are;
and being as all men are,
he was humbler yet,
even to accepting death,
death on a cross.
But God raised him high
and gave him the name
which is above all other names
so that all beings
in the heavens, on earth and in the underworld,
should bend the knee at the name of Jesus
and that every tongue should acclaim
Jesus Christ as Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.]

[Short Form: omit text in brackets.]

**A reading from the holy Gospel
according to Matthew 21:28–32**

Jesus said to the chief priests and the elders of the people, 'What is your opinion? A man had two sons. He went and said to the first, "My boy, you go and work in the vineyard today." He answered, "I will not go", but afterwards thought better of it and went. The man then went and said the same thing to the second who answered, "Certainly, sir", but did not go. Which of the two did the father's will?' 'The first' they said. Jesus said to them, 'I tell you solemnly, tax collectors and prostitutes are making their way into the kingdom of God before you. For John came to you, a pattern of true righteousness, but you did not believe him, and yet the tax collectors and prostitutes did. Even after seeing that, you refused to think better of it and believe in him.'

Second Reading

This is the only occasion in the three-year cycle of readings for Sundays and feasts that the whole of Philippians 2:1–11 is included in the lectionary. It consists of two inter-related parts – Paul's deeply felt appeal to the Philippians to be united among themselves, followed by the celebrated canticle that sums up the paschal mystery. The canticle is heard independently on Palm Sunday and on the Exaltation of the Holy Cross, while today the lectionary offers the option of reading only Paul's appeal without the hymn. Not to proclaim the full reading today would be a great pity. It is an ideal example of how Paul, in addressing a problematic situation, is inspired to profound theological reflection.

Paul's extended plea for the community to "be united in your love, with a common purpose and a common mind" demonstrates the strength of the affection he has for them. It's a powerful and persuasive exhortation. But it's more than a moral appeal to good will. It's grounded in the self-sacrificing love of Jesus Christ and is the defining trait of those who claim his name. Believers must make his mind their own. That's what the canticle spells out so lucidly. With admirable economy it crystallises the whole paschal mystery.

This is a privileged text for readers to proclaim. In the first part, they are conveying the passionate love Paul has for the Philippians. This calls for great empathy and depth of feeling. In the second they are giving voice to an early Christian confession of faith. Each phrase should be given due emphasis, allowing the assembly time to digest its condensed meaning. This is not a text to be rushed. It deserves a solemn and measured delivery.

Gospel

All four gospels contain accounts of Jesus' ministry in Jerusalem in the interval between his triumphant entry into the city and the start of his passion. They vary in length and content. John devotes six chapters (11–17) to this interlude, but most of these are taken up with Jesus' intimate conversation with his disciples. Luke has two chapters, Mark three, and Matthew five (21–25). Apart from the cleansing of the Temple (21:12–17), Matthew's material is teaching-rather than action-oriented.

Today's reading, the parable of the two sons, is the first of three in quick succession. As has been noted before, the parables Jesus told are sometimes followed by an explanation or application. This may have been the case here. The parable proper is something that could have come from the wisdom tradition of the Old Testament. One son says "yes" to his father's command but reneges, the other says "no" at first but then obeys. Which is to be commended? The latter. This brief parable brings to mind Jesus' saying in the sermon on the mount: "All you need say is 'Yes' if you mean yes, 'No' if you mean no" (5:37).

Jesus then proceeds to apply the parable to his audience of Jewish leaders. Sinners whose way of life was "no" had come to believe in John the Baptist; the leaders who purported to say "yes" had failed to follow the Baptist. This allegation of hypocrisy on the part of the authorities is the opening shot in what will soon become the deepening conflict that culminates in Jesus' death. It will do no harm for ministers of the word to have this in mind when they proclaim this text.

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)