

SUNDAY READINGS

READ AT HOME

Twenty-Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Year A

24 September 2023



Collect

O God, who founded all the commands of your sacred Law upon love of you and of our neighbour, grant that, by keeping your precepts, we may merit to attain eternal life. 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

All of the letters written in Paul's name, whether certainly by him or by an author invoking his name, begin with a greeting. Sometimes the lectionary includes this greeting, sometimes it doesn't. We don't, for example, get to hear how the letter to the Philippians begins. Here's the opening verse: "From Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, to all the saints in Christ Jesus, together with their presiding elders and deacons". A few things about this are worthy of note.

First of all, Paul, who often enough insists on his unique apostolic authority, presents himself in partnership with Timothy. He describes them both as servants or slaves – of Christ Jesus. Using the same word, Paul will write of Jesus as assuming "the condition of a slave" (2:7). The members of the community are called "saints," not, of course, because they have been through a canonisation process, but because they have received the Spirit of holiness. The community has an emerging leadership structure; there are "presiding elders and deacons". These terms don't have the meaning they acquired later when Church offices became more systematised. Only time will tell how successfully the Spirit is guiding today's Church towards a new era of servant leadership.

A reading from the prophet Isaiah 55:6–9

Seek the Lord while he is still to be found,
call to him while he is still near.
Let the wicked man abandon his way,
the evil man his thoughts.
Let him turn back to the Lord who will take pity on him,
to our God who is rich in forgiving;
for my thoughts are not your thoughts,
my ways not your ways – it is the Lord who speaks.
Yes, the heavens are as high above earth
as my ways are above your ways,
my thoughts above your thoughts.

First Reading

This excerpt from the book of the prophet Isaiah is part of a longer passage read during the solemn liturgy of the word at the Paschal Vigil. As was noted there, chapter 55 of the book of the prophet Isaiah brings the second section of the work to a splendid close and threads together many of its themes. Generally called the Book of Consolation, chapters 40–55 are addressed to the exiles returning home from exile in Babylon.

Today's text is a call to conversion. The wicked and evil are exhorted: "Seek the Lord while he is still to be found". This is not at all a threat, but a positive invitation to sinners to put their trust in "our God who is rich in forgiving". They are reminded of the mystery and majesty of God who transcends the limitations of the human mind. If a feature of sinfulness is to be held mentally captive by narrow categories of reward and punishment, then the discovery of divine forgiveness will bring about a true liberation of mind, heart and spirit.

This is a short but appealing reading. It begins with the earthy reality of the human condition, but swiftly moves into the infinite realm of God's mercy and compassion. Readers will surely enjoy delivering this good news with sympathy and strength. The NRSV lectionary employs inclusive language.

Responsorial Psalm Ps 144:2–3, 8–9, 17–18

R. The Lord is near to all who call him.

I will bless you day after day
and praise your name for ever.
The Lord is great, highly to be praised,
his greatness cannot be measured. **R.**

The Lord is kind and full of compassion,
slow to anger, abounding in love.
How good is the Lord to all,
compassionate to all his creatures. **R.**

The Lord is just in all his ways
and loving in all his deeds.
He is close to all who call him,
who call on him from their hearts. **R.**

Responsorial Psalm

Psalm 144/145 is one of a number of psalms structured on the successive letters of the Hebrew alphabet. From start to finish it is a joyful hymn, blending the summons to praise with grounds for such praise. Various verses from Psalm 144/145 constitute the responsorial psalm on Sundays 14 and 19 in Year A, as well as today. The three chosen for today come from the beginning, middle and end of the psalm. Each of these three Sundays features a different response; today's comes from late in the psalm.

The first stanza is a personal declaration of praise ("I will bless you day after day"). The other two are affirmations of faith in Israel's God who is kind, full of compassion, faithful, loving, just and close by. The second stanza echoes the core creedal statement found in Exodus and elsewhere in the Hebrew scriptures: "Lord, Lord, a God of tenderness and compassion, slow to anger, rich in kindness and faithfulness" (Ex 34:6).

Otherwise, the language and format of the responsorial psalm are quite straightforward. It should be a joy for readers to lead the assembly in this faith-filled prayer.

**A reading from the first letter of
St Paul to the Philippians 1:20–24, 27**

Christ will be glorified in my body, whether by my life or by my death. Life to me, of course, is Christ, but then death would bring me something more; but then again, if living in this body means doing work which is having good results – I do not know what I should choose. I am caught in this dilemma: I want to be gone and be with Christ, which would be very much the better, but for me to stay alive in this body is a more urgent need for your sake.

Avoid anything in your everyday lives that would be unworthy of the gospel of Christ.

**A reading from the holy Gospel
according to Matthew 20:1–16**

Jesus said to his disciples: 'The kingdom of heaven is like a landowner going out at daybreak to hire workers for his vineyard. He made an agreement with the workers for one denarius a day, and sent them to his vineyard. Going out at about the third hour he saw others standing idle in the market place and said to them, "You go to my vineyard too and I will give you a fair wage." So they went. At about the sixth hour and again at about the ninth hour, he went out and did the same. Then at about the eleventh hour he went out and found more men standing round, and he said to them, "Why have you been standing here idle all day?" "Because no one has hired us" they answered. He said to them, "You go into my vineyard too." In the evening, the owner of the vineyard said to his bailiff, "Call the workers and pay them their wages, starting with the last arrivals and ending with the first." So those who were hired at about the eleventh hour came forward and received one denarius each. When the first came, they expected to get more, but they too received one denarius each. They took it, but grumbled at the landowner. "The men who came last" they said "have done only one hour, and you have treated them the same as us, though we have done a heavy day's work in all the heat." He answered one of them and said, "My friend, I am not being unjust to you; did we not agree on one denarius? Take your earnings and go. I choose to pay the last-comer as much as I pay you. Have I no right to do what I like with my own? Why be envious because I am generous?" Thus the last will be first, and the first, last.'

Second Reading

After our long journey through the weighty theological treatise that is Paul's letter to the Romans, a short sprint through a letter radiating joy and friendship may come as a welcome relief. The generally sunny spirit of the letter to the Philippians is clear, but where, when and why it was written are questions that remain without definitive answers.

It's a pity that today's first extract gives no clue to Paul's affection for the Philippians. It plunges us straightaway into a rhetorical debate that Paul is having with himself while imprisoned. What would be the better thing for him – to die and be with Christ, or to live on and continue his mission? Unfortunately, the compilers of the lectionary chose not to include any of the preceding material in which Paul greets the community, prays thankfully for them and explains the situation which has given rise to his dilemma.

Deprived of this context, the reading is more puzzling and less appealing than it might otherwise have been. It asks us, without warning, to enter sympathetically into the argument Paul is having in his own mind and to follow the restless toing and froing of his thought. Readers will need to study this text very carefully to ensure they themselves have grasped its fluid logic. Only then will they have any hope of illuminating it for the assembly. The rapidity of Paul's thinking calls for a relatively slow and deliberate delivery. Above all, Paul's classic saying – "Life to me, of course, is Christ" – should be given memorable emphasis.

Gospel

Matthew alone includes the parable of the workers in the vineyard in his gospel. He places it immediately after Jesus' saying, "Many who are first who will be last, and the last, first," and concludes it with the same words. In spite of being bookmarked by this axiom, the parable isn't a simple illustration of it. The real point of the story seems to be that God is equally generous to all.

Given a contemporary mindset that evaluates everything in economic terms, the parable has become more provocative rather than less. It offends our ingrained habit of calculating just desserts. This can distort our hearing of the story. The owner of the vineyard has not exploited any of his workers; all are paid the going rate for a day's labour. He has simply chosen to pay those who have worked least the same amount as those who have worked most. He has been remarkably generous.

The parable is open to interpretations that may or may not have been in Jesus' or Matthew's mind. The early workers can be seen as the Jews, the later ones as either "tax collectors and sinners" or as the Gentiles. The risk in this kind of allegorising is that it may divert attention away from the primary focus: God's generosity. Perhaps the payment of one denarius to each worker implies that the kingdom of God is a gift that cannot be given in part; it is an indivisible blessing, given as a whole.

Precisely because the parable is disturbing, it is likely to be well-remembered. Ministers of the word have the challenge of proclaiming it afresh, complete with all its repetitions.

Concluding Blessing

May almighty God always keep every adversity far from us
and in his kindness pour out upon us the gifts of his blessing.

Amen.

May God keep our hearts attentive to his words,
that they may be filled with everlasting gladness.

Amen.

And so, may we always understand what is good and right,
and be found ever hastening along
in the path of God's commands,
made coheirs with the citizens of heaven.

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 V, Roman Missal p 716)