

# SUNDAY READINGS

## READ AT HOME

33rd Sunday in Ordinary Time

Year A

19 November 2023



### Collect

Grant us, we pray, O Lord our God,  
the constant gladness of being devoted to you,  
for it is full and lasting happiness  
to serve with constancy  
the author of all that is good.  
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

Woman, wife, mother, social campaigner for migrant women and families, devout Catholic – Caroline Chisholm was all these things and more. In Sydney's St Mary's Cathedral, on Easter Sunday in 1841, she dedicated herself to serve God and neighbour. Her self-offering cost her dearly as she later recalled:

"During the season of Lent of that year, I suffered much, but on the Easter Sunday, I was enabled, at the altar of our Lord, to make an offering of my talents to the God who gave them. I promised to know *neither country nor creed*, but to try and serve all *justly* and impartially. . . I felt my offering was accepted and that God's blessing was on my work; but it was his will to permit many serious difficulties to be thrown in my way, and to conduct me through a rugged path of deep humiliation" (Cited in Rodney Stinson. See, *Judge, Act: Caroline Chisholm's Lay Apostolate*, Sydney: Yorkcross, 2009, 27).

It may have been a way of the cross for her, but her never-say-die determination and enterprise brought untold blessings to the migrant women and families she served.

**A reading from the book of Proverbs**  
**31:10–13, 19–20, 30–31**

A perfect wife – who can find her?  
She is far beyond the price of pearls.  
Her husband's heart has confidence in her,  
from her he will derive no little profit.  
Advantage and not hurt she brings him  
all the days of her life.  
She is always busy with wool and with flax,  
she does her work with eager hands.  
She sets her hands to the distaff,  
her fingers grasp the spindle.  
She holds out her hand to the poor,  
she opens her arms to the needy.  
Charm is deceitful, and beauty empty;  
the woman who is wise is the one to praise.  
Give her a share in what her hands have worked for,  
and let her works tell her praises at the city gates.

**First Reading**

The final chapter of the book of Proverbs is an alphabetical psalm in praise of the “perfect wife”. Two things are useful to bear in mind with regard to this idealised portrait of the married woman. The first is that it may have been added to the work to serve as a counter-balance to the negative portrayal of women in its early chapters. The second is that in spite of the constraints of ancient patriarchal societies this woman has an appreciable degree of agency.

That said, there is no doubt that her qualities are assessed in terms of their value to her husband: “from her he will derive no little profit . . . Advantage and not hurt she brings him”. She is praised for her weaving skills and for her generosity to the poor, but the lectionary text omits reference to her enterprise in buying land and planting a vineyard, and in trading her wares with merchants. What we hear puts the emphasis on her domestic role and the honour she brings her husband, neither of which will appeal to a contemporary congregation that takes marriage equality and women's careers for granted.

The choice of the reading will only become clear when the gospel parable of the talents is read. In anticipation of that story, the ideal wife is presented as a model of initiative. She's industrious and puts her gifts to good use. Some readers may have to overcome their reluctance to subscribe to this idealisation if they are to proclaim the text well. Each of the two-line units should be respected in the delivery.

**Responsorial Psalm**

**Ps 127:1–5**

**R.** Happy are those who fear the Lord.  
O blessed are those who fear the Lord  
and walk in his ways!  
By the labour of your hands you shall eat.  
You will be happy and prosper. **R.**  
Your wife like a fruitful vine  
in the heart of your house;  
your children like shoots of the olive,  
around your table. **R.**  
Indeed thus shall be blessed  
the man who fears the Lord.  
May the Lord bless you from Zion  
in a happy Jerusalem  
all the days of your life. **R.**

**Responsorial Psalm**

While the first reading remained within the matrix of patriarchal life, it did pay homage to the gifts and virtues of the “perfect wife”. The responsorial psalm switches the focus back to the male head of the household. The response seems inclusive – “Happy are those who fear the Lord” – but the first verse quickly homes in on the working man whose labour will provide food and prosperity for the home.

A man like this who respects the Lord and lives accordingly will be blessed with a fertile wife and an abundance of children. Furthermore, the happiness of families like this will overflow into the community and create “a happy Jerusalem”. The key to all this blessedness is the faithful following of the way of the Lord.

Apart from the short final verse, the whole of Psalm 127/128 is used for the responsorial psalm. In all likelihood, the assembly will hear and understand the response as inclusive of all believers, but the verses do stand in tension with this. Readers should respect the poetry of the short lines and also take care with the final five-line stanza.

## **A reading from the first letter of St Paul to the Thessalonians 5:1–6**

You will not be expecting us to write anything to you, brothers, about ‘times and seasons,’ since you know very well that the Day of the Lord is going to come like a thief in the night. It is when people are saying, ‘How quiet and peaceful it is,’ that the worst suddenly happens, as suddenly as labour pains come on a pregnant woman; and there will be no way for anybody to evade it.

But it is not as if you live in the dark, my brothers, for that Day to overtake you like a thief. No, you are all sons of light and sons of the day: we do not belong to the night or to darkness, so we should not go on sleeping, as everyone else does, but stay wide awake and sober.

## **A reading from the holy Gospel according to Matthew 25:14–30**

Jesus spoke this parable to his disciples: ‘The kingdom of heaven is like a man on his way abroad who summoned his servants and entrusted his property to them. To one he gave five talents, to another two, to a third one; each in proportion to his ability. Then he set out. [The man who had received the five talents promptly went and traded with them and made five more. The man who had received two made two more in the same way. But the man who had received one went off and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master’s money.] Now a long time after, the master of those servants came back and went through his accounts with them. The man who had received the five talents came forward bringing five more. “Sir”, he said “you entrusted me with five talents; here are five more that I have made.” His master said to him, “Well done, good and faithful servant; you have shown you can be faithful in small things, I will trust you with greater; come and join in your master’s happiness.” [Next the man with the two talents came forward. “Sir,” he said “you entrusted me with two talents; here are two more that I have made.” His master said to him, “Well done, good and faithful servant; you have shown you can be faithful in small things, I will trust you with greater; come and join in your master’s happiness.” Last came forward the man who had the one talent. “Sir,” said he “I had heard you were a hard man, reaping where you have not sown and gathering where you have not scattered; so I was afraid, and I went off and hid your talent in the ground. Here it is; it was yours, you have it back.” But his master answered him, “You wicked and lazy servant! So you knew that I reap where I have not sown and gather where I have not scattered? Well then, you should have deposited my money with the bankers, and on my return I would have recovered my capital with interest. So now, take the talent from him and give it to the man who has the five talents. For to everyone who has will be given more, and he will have more than enough; but from the man who has not, even what he has will be taken away. As for this good-for-nothing servant, throw him out into the dark, where there will be weeping and grinding of teeth.”’]

*[Short Form: omit text in brackets.]*

## **Second Reading**

It seems that some of the Thessalonians had grown complacent, believing that “the Day of the Lord” had already come in the death and resurrection of Jesus. As a result, they considered themselves no longer subject to judgement. Paul is at pains to disillusion them.

While at no time speculating as to when this Day would arrive, he warns them it will take them by surprise if they aren’t ready for it. They run the risk of being caught napping. Paul uses two contrasting images to make his point – the householder taken unawares by a night-time thief and the expectant mother whose pregnancy suddenly erupts in birth. One has unhappy consequences, the other joyful.

Paul implies that the Thessalonians are letting themselves be mesmerised by the Roman propaganda phrase “peace and security”. Without spelling out how, Paul clearly implies that the Day of the Lord will call them to account. They must stay wide awake, remain sober and live as children of the light – advice that may bring last Sunday’s parable of the ten wedding attendants to mind.

This final reading from 1 Thessalonians has an ominous tone which readers should not play down, but it also has an encouraging reminder that believers are children of light and of the day. The NRSV renders the text in inclusive language.

## **Gospel**

This second-last parable in Matthew’s gospel maintains Jesus’ focus on the final judgement. The story of the wealthy traveller who entrusts three slaves with large but varying sums of money is long and repetitious. The lectionary allows an abbreviated version to be read, but this completely deprives the parable of its purpose. It aims to deliver a stern warning. Jesus’ followers have been blessed with the gift of the kingdom. Accepting this gift brings with it the obligation to live the reign of God adventurously and advocate for it enthusiastically.

The parable as we have it has been heavily allegorised. It testifies to Jesus’ willingness to use the “ways of the world” as a vehicle for his teaching. He dares to associate God’s expectations of believers with the master’s economic ruthlessness. He’s unafraid to run the risk of reinforcing an image of God as harsh and punitive. This presents homilists with a challenge but no sound reason for choosing to proclaim the truncated version. Preachers can make the point that Jesus is telling this story when he is on the brink of wagering his whole life and mission. Fear of failure does not deter him. Nor should it paralyse his followers from testifying to the good news.

## Concluding Blessing

May the peace of God,  
which surpasses all understanding,  
keep our hearts and minds  
in the knowledge and love of God,  
and of his Son, our Lord Jesus Christ.

**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)

