

SUNDAY READINGS

READ AT HOME

Third Sunday in Ordinary Time

Year B

21 January 2024



Collect

Almighty ever-living God,
direct our actions according to your good pleasure,
that in the name of your beloved Son
we may abound in good works.
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

In the “Ordered” (rather than “Ordinary”) Time of Year B, the evangelist Mark is our principal guide. At the outset of this first and shortest gospel, Mark sets out his intent: “The beginning of the Good News about Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” He writes in plain Greek, with a journalist’s flair for story-telling and an eye for vivid detail. He presents Jesus as an authoritative teacher and powerful liberator from demonic powers. He highlights the disciples’ inability to accept Jesus’ messianic suffering. The only human being to confess Jesus as Son of God is the Roman centurion on Calvary.

A brief reminder that through Ordinary Time, the gospel is the anchor text of the liturgy of the word. The first reading, always from the Old Testament, is chosen for its connection to the gospel. The psalm, in turn, complements the first reading. The reading from the New Testament is quite independent of all the others. After our series from 1 Corinthians, the other letters we hear from are 2 Corinthians, Ephesians, James and finally chapters 2-10 of Hebrews.

A reading from the prophet Jonah 3:1– 5, 10

The word of the Lord was addressed to Jonah: 'Up! he said 'Go to Nineveh, the great city, and preach to them as I told you to.' Jonah set out and went to Nineveh in obedience to the word of the Lord. Now Nineveh was a city great beyond compare: it took three days to cross it. Jonah went on into the city, making a day's journey. He preached in these words, 'Only forty days more and Nineveh is going to be destroyed.' And the people of Nineveh believed in God; they proclaimed a fast and put on sackcloth from the greatest to the least.

God saw their efforts to renounce their evil behaviour. And God relented: he did not inflict on them the disaster which he had threatened.

First Reading

The conclusion to today's short reading from Jonah connects it with the story of the golden calf in Exodus 32. In both cases, we are told, "God relented and did not bring on his people the disaster he has threatened" (Ex 32:14; Jn 3:10). The outcome is the same but the two stories are very different.

In the first case, it's God's people who lapse into idolatry and are saved only through Moses' intercession. In the second, it's the foreigners of Nineveh who are called to renounce their wickedness, and it's their own repentance that spares them. Moses and Jonah themselves are a study in contrasts. Moses appears as an historical figure and God's collaborator, whereas Jonah is a fictional character and recalcitrant recruit.

It's a great shame that this sole passage from Jonah in the three-year cycle is so exclusively positive. It gives no clue to the twists and turns, the hyperbole and humour, or the serious message of the whole story. Even today the comical detail of Nineveh's animals having to wear sackcloth and fast is omitted. The book isn't long, only four chapters, and well worth reading in full.

As it stands, the reading is entirely good news. It's modest in length and action-packed. Readers will relish the opportunity to proclaim this short story.

Responsorial Psalm

Ps 24:4–9

R. Teach me your ways, 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.
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

With the responsorial psalm, the focus shifts from the collective repentance of the Ninevites to the psalmist's personal relationship with God. Like the reading from Jonah, verses have been selected from Psalm 24/25 to present a positive picture. They include no direct reference to the psalmist's admission of sin, guilt and remorse elsewhere in the psalm.

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 plea for God's mercy that hints at some failure on the psalmist's part. The third is a confession of faith in God who "shows the path," "guides the humble," and "teaches his way."

In sum, the psalmist consistently acclaims the goodness of God. A trusting tone is set by the response and is maintained throughout. Readers should find it easy enough to lead the assembly in this confident and positive prayer.

**A reading from the first letter of St Paul
to the Corinthians 7:29–31**

Brothers: our time is growing short. Those who have wives should live as though they had none, and those who mourn should live as though they had nothing to mourn for; those who are enjoying life should live as though there were nothing to laugh about; those whose life is buying things should live as though they had nothing of their own; and those who have to deal with the world should not become engrossed in it. I say this because the world as we know it is passing away.

**A reading from the holy Gospel
according to Mark 1:14–20**

After John had been arrested, Jesus went into Galilee. There he proclaimed the Good News from God. 'The time has come' he said 'and the kingdom of God is close at hand. Repent, and believe the Good News.'

As he was walking along by the Sea of Galilee he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net in the lake - for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, 'Follow me and I will make you into fishers of men.' And at once they left their nets and followed him.

Going on a little further, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John; they too were in their boat, mending their nets, he called them at once, and, leaving their father Zebedee in the boat with the men he employed, they went after him.

Second Reading

After dealing with sexual scandal in chapter 6 of 1 Corinthians, Paul sets himself to reply to the questions about marriage, divorce, celibacy and virginity that have been put to him by the community. The lectionary overlooks much of this discussion and advances to the latter part of chapter 7 from which we read two passages.

The key to today's text is found in the opening and closing sentences. They are terse statements of eschatological urgency. Time is short, Paul says, and "the world as we know it is passing away." His acute awareness of this unique situation informs the advice he gives. That is to live radically and counter-culturally. Believers are to confound the world by behaving in ways that are the reverse of what might be expected. While married life is mentioned, it is only in passing, and all of a piece with the thrust of Paul's exhortation.

The vivid expectation that early Christians had of the imminent arrival of the end times has long faded. The world has seen many crises since then, such as the turn of the first millennium or the devastation of the plague or the horror of the Great War, that aroused fears of annihilation. Today's existential threats, such as nuclear conflagration or climate catastrophe, and the questions they raise about our life choices, can give us insight into Paul's advice.

The reading is short and serious, yet not sombre, as in essence Paul is advocating freedom of spirit. Readers should make Paul's points one by one with due deliberation.

Gospel

We heard the very first verse of Mark's gospel – "The beginning of the Good News about Jesus Christ, the Son of God" – back in Advent. His account of Jesus' baptism is read at the end of the Christmas season, and we'll hear of Jesus' temptations soon enough on the first Sunday of Lent. Today we formally commence our "Ordinary Time" journey with Jesus as he launches his public ministry.

Mark's mention of the Baptist's arrest could hardly be more laconic, but it's the first hint of the cross that is to come. For now, it's the hour of the reign of God. Scholars point out that "the kingdom of God" is a verb rather than a noun. It connotes God's "reigning." In spite of its early prominence, Mark does not refer as much to the kingdom as do the other synoptic writers. As he made clear in the first verse, he is more intent on testifying to Jesus' identity as Messiah and Son of God.

The call of the two sets of brothers and their immediate compliance establishes Jesus' authority right from the start. Mark will highlight this authority time and again. Jesus' pledge to Simon and Andrew to make them "fishers of people" suits the occasion but does not feature again once his mission gets under way. Authority and action go hand in hand in Mark's gospel. Today's reading is but the beginning.

An alternative translation of the scripture readings is given here from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV). This may be particularly useful for those in parishes which use the NRSV Lectionary.

THIRD SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

FIRST READING (NRSV)

A reading from the book of the prophet Jonah 3:1–5, 10

The word of the Lord came to Jonah, saying,
"Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city,
and proclaim to it the message that I tell you."
So Jonah set out and went to Nineveh,
according to the word of the Lord.
Now Nineveh was an exceedingly large city,
a three days' walk across.
Jonah began to go into the city, going a day's walk.
And he cried out,
"Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!"
And the people of Nineveh believed God;
they proclaimed a fast,
and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth.
'When God saw what they did,
how they turned from their evil ways,
God changed his mind about the calamity
that he had said he would bring upon them;
and he did not do it.

SECOND READING (NRSV)

A reading from the first letter of Paul to the Corinthians 7:29–31

Brothers and sisters,
the appointed time has grown short;
from now on,
let even those who have wives be as though they had none,
and those who mourn as though they were not mourning,
and those who rejoice as though they were not rejoicing,
and those who buy as though they had no possessions,
and those who deal with the world as though they had no dealings with it.
For the present form of this world is passing away.

GOSPEL (NRSV)

A reading from the holy gospel according to Mark 1:14–20

After John was arrested,
Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God,
and saying,
"The time is fulfilled,
and the kingdom of God has come near;
repent, and believe in the good news."
As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee,
he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the sea—
for they were fishermen.
And Jesus said to them,
"Follow me and I will make you fishers of people."
And immediately they left their nets and followed him.
As Jesus went a little farther,
he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John,
who were in their boat mending the nets.
Immediately he called them;
and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men,
and followed him.

Concluding Prayer

Blessing for the Beginning of the New Year

May God, the source and origin of all blessing,
grant us grace,
pour out his blessing in abundance,
and keep us safe from harm throughout the year.

Amen.

May he give us integrity in the faith,
endurance in hope,
and perseverance in charity
with holy patience to the end.

Amen.

May he order our days and our deeds in his peace,
grant our prayers in this and in every place,
and lead us 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 the Beginning of the Year, Roman Missal p 710)