

SUNDAY READINGS

READ AT HOME

Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Year B

28 January 2024



Collect

Grant us, Lord our God,
that we may honour you with all our mind,
and love everyone in truth of 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

Unclean spirits play a significant role in Mark's gospel. Scripture scholar Brendan Byrne sets the scene for us: "People in the ancient world attributed to demons control of storms and other manifestations of nature out of control and threatening to human life. Demons could also enter human beings and bring about illness of various kinds – physical (sickness), psychological (madness) and moral (vice, alienation from God, resistance to divine grace). In general, the demonic world was held to be 'unclean,' standing over against the 'cleanliness' or 'holiness' associated with God and communicated by God to the covenant people, Israel... How to preserve the covenant 'holiness' and avoid contamination with the unclean and destructive force of the demonic was a major preoccupation of the Jewish religious system around the time of Jesus" (*A Costly Freedom. A Theological Reading of Mark's Gospel*. Sydney: St Paul's, 2008, 4).

A reading from the book of Deuteronomy

18:15–20

Moses said to the people: 'Your God will raise up for you a prophet like myself, from among yourselves, from your own brothers; to him you must listen. This is what you yourselves asked of the Lord your God at Horeb on the day of the Assembly. "Do not let me hear again" you said "the voice of the Lord my God, nor look any longer on this great fire, or I shall die"; and the Lord said to me, "All they have spoken is well said. I will raise up a prophet like yourself for them from their own brothers; I will put my words into his mouth and he shall tell them all I command him. The man who does not listen to my words that he speaks in my name, shall be held answerable to me for it. But the prophet who presumes to say in my name a thing I have not commanded him to say, or who speaks in the name of other gods, that prophet shall die."

Responsorial Psalm

Ps 94:1–2, 6–9

R. If today, you hear his voice,
harden not your hearts.

Come, ring out our joy to the Lord;
hail the rock who saves us.
Let us come before him, giving thanks,
with songs let us hail the Lord. **R.**

Come in, let us kneel and bend low;
let us kneel before the God who made us
for he is our God and we
the people who belong to his pasture,
the flock that is led by his hand. **R.**

O that today you would listen to his voice!
'Harden not your hearts as at Meribah,
as on that day at Massah in the desert
when your fathers put me to the test;
when they tried me, though they saw my work.' **R.**

First Reading

Chapters 12-26 of the book of Deuteronomy form a loosely organised collection of laws referred to as the Deuteronomic Code. The first and longest section (chs 12-18) deals with religious observances. Today's reading is part of a passage that differentiates between the true prophet, on the one hand, and false prophets such as magicians, sorcerers and soothsayers, on the other. Those who claim to foretell the future are not genuine. The authentic prophet is one who communicates the will of God.

The key point of interest in this reading is God's promise, relayed by Moses, to "raise up a prophet like yourself." The people, Moses reminds them, were so fearful of directly encountering the sound and sight of God that they begged for a prophet like Moses who would mediate the divine presence safely for them. By the time the Baptist and Jesus appear on the scene, the expectation of such a prophet had intensified. The gospels variously suggest that each of them is this long-awaited prophet. Today the combination of this reading and Mark's account of Jesus' impact has the effect of identifying Jesus as the fulfilment of the divine promise.

This is a challenging text for readers to proclaim. The context and content are likely to be unfamiliar to many. This handicap is exacerbated by the fact that the reading contains a mix of direct and reported speech. As a unit, it conveys Moses' message to the people. But within his address to them, he quotes the people's plea to be spared direct contact with God, and then God's reply. The latter comprises just over half the whole passage. Readers will need to study, rehearse and deliver this text with care if they are going to make it intelligible to the assembly.

Responsorial Psalm

God's warning, relayed by Moses, for the people to heed the words of a true prophet, has prompted the choice of Psalm 94/95 for the responsorial psalm. It falls into two contrasting parts. The first is a resounding call to worship the Lord, in procession and prostration. God is to be acclaimed as creator and redeemer, saving rock and shepherd for his people. This joyous summons leads to an abrupt change of tone, from enthusiastic praise to ominous warning. God chastises his people, remembering their hardness of heart in the desert. Today's response – "If today you hear his voice, harden not your hearts" – is adapted from this part of the psalm.

The abrupt transition from praise to rebuke may reflect the original use of the psalm. It may have been composed to accompany a joyful procession into the Temple. Once they have entered the Temple the assembled people are given a blunt warning to be ready to listen to the reading of the Torah. A parallel may be seen in the swift transition from an opening hymn of praise to the penitential rite of the Mass. Readers have no opportunity to explain this, but must proclaim the psalm as given, with two exuberant verses followed by one of admonition. The reader's tone of joy must change in the third verse to one of heartfelt pleading. Perhaps the sudden change will be less of a jolt for the congregation because the response they hear and pray will have prepared the way for it.

A reading from the first letter of St Paul to the Corinthians 7:32–35

I would like to see you free from all worry. An unmarried man can devote himself to the Lord's affairs, all he need worry about is pleasing the Lord; but a married man has to bother about the world's affairs and devote himself to pleasing his wife: he is torn two ways. In the same way an unmarried woman, like a young girl, can devote herself to the Lord's affairs; all she need worry about is being holy in body and spirit. The married woman, on the other hand, has to worry about the world's affairs and devote herself to pleasing her husband. I say this only to help you, not to put a halter round your necks, but simply to make sure that everything is as it should be, and that you give your undivided attention to the Lord.

A reading from the holy Gospel according to Mark 1:21–28

Jesus and his followers went as far as Capernaum, and as soon as the Sabbath came Jesus went to the synagogue and began to teach. And his teaching made a deep impression on them because, unlike the scribes, he taught them with authority.

In their synagogue just then there was a man possessed by an unclean spirit, and it shouted, 'What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are: the Holy One of God.' But Jesus said sharply, 'Be quiet! Come out of him!' And the unclean spirit threw the man into convulsions and with a loud cry went out of him. The people were so astonished that they started asking each other what it all meant. 'Here is a teaching that is new' they said 'and with authority behind it: he gives orders even to unclean spirits and they obey him.' And his reputation rapidly spread everywhere, through all the surrounding Galilean countryside.

Second Reading

The whole of chapter 7 in Paul's first letter to the Corinthians deals with a range of inter-related issues – marriage, sex, virginity, conversion to Christianity and divorce – all in the context of the imminent upheaval of the end times. This is made explicit in the opening and closing verses of last week's reading, but the urgency of the times is neither mentioned or even alluded to in today's text. For this and other reasons it's a challenging one to proclaim.

As we have it, Paul's message is that remaining unmarried is preferable to marrying because single persons can pay "undivided attention to the Lord," whereas married people must please both their spouse and the Lord. Devoid of context, Paul appears to be teaching that celibacy is superior to marriage. As an unqualified principle, this is no longer agreed upon, but it could be justified in the light of the impending crisis the Corinthians expected. Paul is also conscious of the need for the community to offer countercultural witness in this city of mixed faith and morals.

A further difficulty arises from Paul's rhetorical style. Here his language is didactic and repetitive, though perhaps he could be thanked for treating women and men on an equal basis. His good intentions (whether realised or not) are evident in the first sentence: "I would like to see you free from all worry." As usual, the reader's task is to do justice to the text, not pass judgement on it. In this case, careful preparation is called for.

Gospel

Archaeological research seems to confirm that Capernaum served as Jesus' base for his ministry in Galilee. Mark hastens to tell us that no sooner had Jesus called his first disciples than his mission is in full flight. Its two defining features – teaching and healing – are on immediate display. The combined effect is to highlight Jesus' authority. His teaching is authoritative in comparison with that of the scribes and, after his own confrontation with Satan in the wilderness, Jesus' power over the demonic is definitive. Mark will continue to stress Jesus' authority and the impression it made. The fact that Jesus frees the man from the unclean spirit on the sabbath anticipates his declaration that "the Son of Man is master even of the sabbath" (2:28).

The evil spirit's identification of Jesus as "the Holy One of God" could be either a hostile taunt or a truthful admission. We are left unsure. This is the only occasion in Mark's gospel when this title is used, but the issue of Jesus' identity keeps recurring. The demons in Gerasene territory will call him "son of the Most High God" (5:7), Peter will confess him as the Messiah (8:29), but only the centurion on Calvary will acknowledge him as "Son of God" (15:39). Mark's purpose, announced in the very first verse of the gospel, is to proclaim the Crucified One as the Christ and Son of God.

Of its very nature, this passage from Mark lends itself to lively proclamation

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.

FOURTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

FIRST READING (NRSV)

A reading from the book of Deuteronomy 18:15–20

Moses spoke to the people; he said:
"The Lord your God will raise up for you
a prophet like me from among your own people;
you shall heed such a prophet.
This is what you requested of the Lord your God at Horeb
on the day of the assembly when you said:
'If I hear the voice of the Lord my God any more,
or ever again see this great fire, I will die.'
"Then the Lord replied to me:
'They are right in what they have said.
I will raise up for them a prophet like you
from among their own people;
I will put my words in the mouth of the prophet,
who shall speak to them everything that I command.
'"Anyone who does not heed the words
that the prophet shall speak in my name,
I myself will hold accountable.
But any prophet who speaks in the name of other gods,
or who presumes to speak in my name
a word that I have not commanded the prophet to speak—
that prophet shall die."

SECOND READING (NRSV)

A reading from the first letter of Paul to the Corinthians 7:32–35

I want you to be free from anxieties.
The unmarried man is anxious about the affairs of the Lord,
how to please the Lord;
but the married man is anxious about the affairs of the world,
how to please his wife, and his interests are divided.
The unmarried woman and the virgin
are concerned about the affairs of the Lord,
so that they may be holy in body and spirit;
but the married woman is concerned about the affairs of the world,
how to please her husband.
I say this for your own benefit,
not to put any, restraint upon you,
but to promote good order and unhindered devotion to the Lord.

GOSPEL (NRSV)

A reading from the holy gospel according to Mark 1:21–28

The disciples went to Capernaum;
and when the sabbath came,
Jesus entered the synagogue and taught.
They were astounded at his teaching,
for he taught them as one having authority,
and not as the scribes.

Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit,
and he cried out,
"What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth?
Have you come to destroy us?
I know who you are, the Holy One of God."
But Jesus rebuked him, saying,
"Be silent, and come out of him!"
And the unclean spirit, convulsing the man
and crying with a loud voice, came out of him.
They were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another,
"What is this? A new teaching—with authority!
He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him."
At once Jesus' fame began to spread
throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.

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)