

# SUNDAY READINGS

## READ AT HOME

First Sunday of Lent

Year B

18 February 2024



### Collect

Grant, almighty God,  
through the yearly observances of holy Lent,  
that we may grow in understanding  
of the riches hidden in Christ  
and by worthy conduct pursue their effects.  
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

Mark offers no detail of the temptations with which Satan plied Jesus. Where, then, does Satan appear again in this gospel? Firstly, in the dispute Jesus has about driving out demons (3:22-27). Later, in explaining the parable of the sower, Jesus portrays Satan as a thief stealing the word away from people (4:15). But the most telling instance comes further on. When Simon Peter reacts with “human thinking” to Jesus’ talk of suffering and death, Jesus bluntly rebukes him: “Get behind me, Satan!” (8:33). This highlights the key temptation faced by the crowds, the authorities and the disciples – their entrenched resistance to the true nature of Jesus’ messiahship. In a word, their denial of the cross. Lent places it squarely before us.

## A reading from the book of Genesis 9:8–15

God spoke to Noah and his sons, 'See, I establish my Covenant with you, and with your descendants after you; also with every living creature to be found with you, birds, cattle and every wild beast with you: everything that came out of the ark, everything that lives on the earth. I establish my Covenant with you: nothing of flesh shall be swept away again by the waters of the flood. There shall be no flood to destroy the earth again.'

God said, 'Here is the sign of the Covenant I make between myself and you and every living creature with you for all generations: I set my bow in the clouds and it shall be a sign of the Covenant between me and the earth. When I gather the clouds over the earth and the bow appears in the clouds, I will recall the Covenant between myself and you and every living creature of every kind. And so the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all things of flesh.'

## Responsorial Psalm

Ps 24:4–9

**R.** Your ways, O Lord, are love and truth  
to those who keep your covenant.

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.**

## First Reading

The story of Noah unfolds through four chapters of the book of Genesis (6-9), with the flood occupying centre stage in the telling of the tale. Scholars observe that, not only have two accounts been woven together to create the biblical version, but quite similar flood stories were common enough in the literature of the ancient near east.

Today's reading presents the happy outcome of the flood. The world has been purged of its wickedness and God establishes a new relationship with the whole of creation. Just as the waters were tamed at the birth of creation (Gen 1), so now, God says, they will never destroy the earth again. Every living thing originally created by God is encompassed by the covenant announced to Noah. The rainbow which could be seen as a divine weapon firing bolts of lightning (Psalm 17/18:14) is now a sign of universal and everlasting peace.

The form of the reading is a solemn pronouncement by God. As it conveys good news from start to finish, it lends itself to being proclaimed with positive energy, but at the same time with dignity and authority. There's every reason for readers to find this a satisfying text to deliver.

## Responsorial Psalm

While the first reading is global in scope, Psalm 24/25 is the prayer of an individual appealing to God for help in a time of trial. The verses of the whole psalm alternate between heartfelt pleas for divine assistance and expressions of confidence in God's proven faithfulness. The three verses selected for use today all fall into the latter category. Along with the response, they reinforce the message of hope affirmed by the "rainbow covenant" with Noah.

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. Care, however, will need to be taken with the relatively long and unfamiliar response. In the first line, the address "O Lord" calls for a moment's pause before and after, and the phrase "love and truth" should be given a slight upward inflection, followed by another momentary pause, to alert the assembly there is more to come. Once this is attended to, readers should find it easy enough to lead the assembly in this confident and positive prayer.

### **A reading from the first letter of St Peter 3:18–22**

Christ himself, innocent though he was, died once for sins, died for the guilty, to lead us to God. In the body he was put to death, in the spirit he was raised to life, and, in the spirit, he went to preach to the spirits in prison. Now it was long ago, when Noah was still building that ark which saved only a small group of eight people 'by water', and when God was still waiting patiently, that these spirits refused to believe. That water is a type of the baptism which saves you now, and which is not the washing off of physical dirt but a pledge made to God from a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who has entered heaven and is at God's right hand, now that he has made the angels and Dominations and Powers his subjects.

### **A reading from the holy Gospel according to Mark**

**1:12–15**

The Spirit drove Jesus out into the wilderness and he remained there for forty days, and was tempted by Satan. He was with the wild beasts, and the angels looked after him.

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.'

### **Second Reading**

In his second letter, Peter complains that Paul's letters can be hard to understand (3:16). It has to be said that today's passage from Peter's first letter is equally difficult. Even if we can draw a clear message out of it – that by his death, resurrection and return to God Christ has gained authority over all powers, that salvation is offered to all, and that baptism is our way of sharing in that salvation – much remains obscure.

While there is a direct connection with the story of Noah and the flood, no-one is sure what is meant by "the spirits in prison" or by Christ's going to preach to them. There may or may not be a connection with Christ's descent into hell that we confess in the Apostles Creed. Even Peter's description of baptism as "a pledge made to God from a good conscience" is puzzling.

This means that readers face a double challenge. Not only are the contents of the reading opaque, but the way they are expressed – in sentences that become longer and more convoluted as the text progresses – is a further hurdle. In that respect Peter is on a par with Paul!

The first two sentences (in the standard lectionary – the NRSV joins sentences two and three) are relatively straightforward. As statements built up from short phrases, they call for measured delivery that allows each component to be heard. The third sentence is a little longer and less intelligible, so more care is needed. The fourth sentence poses the greatest difficulty. Readers will need to study it closely, rehearse it thoroughly, and do their best to engage the assembly in its unfolding thought. In sum, this is a text to test readers' skills.

### **Gospel**

Some episodes in Mark's gospel are described at length and in great detail. That's not the case today. His account of Jesus' temptations and the start of Jesus' mission could hardly be more succinct. No word is wasted. It's as if Mark has his foot on the accelerator. The verses are action-packed, peppered with dynamic verbs such as "drove," "tempted," "arrested," "proclaimed," and "repent."

Unlike Matthew and Luke, he doesn't elaborate on the temptations Jesus faced in the wilderness (John, of course, makes no reference to the event). Mark devotes a lot more space to the preaching of John the Baptist (1:2-8) than he does to that of Jesus. And it's only much later in his gospel that he explains why John has been arrested (6:17-20). Everything is stripped down to its essentials. Unlike the dense reading from 1 Peter, this is clear and concise. We are propelled into the season of Lent with a sense of urgency.

This is not to say this short reading should be hurried through. It calls for energy and drama rather than speed of delivery. Mark is setting the scene for the life-and-death struggle that will follow - Jesus' battle with the demonic and with unbelief. It's a drum-roll that calls us to attention.

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.

## FIRST SUNDAY OF LENT

### FIRST READING (NRSV)

#### A reading from the book of Genesis

9:8–15

God said to Noah and to his sons with him,  
"As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you  
and your descendants after you,  
and with every living creature that is with you,  
the birds, the domestic animals,  
and every animal of the earth with you,  
as many as came out of the ark.  
I establish my covenant with you,  
that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood,  
and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth."  
God said,  
"This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you  
and every living creature that is with you,  
for all future generations:  
I have set my bow in the clouds,  
and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth.  
When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds,  
I will remember my covenant  
that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh;  
and the waters shall never again become a flood  
to destroy all flesh."

### SECOND READING (NRSV)

#### A reading from the first letter of Peter

3:18–22

Christ suffered for sins once for all,  
the righteous for the unrighteous,  
in order to bring you to God.  
He was put to death in the flesh,  
but made alive in the spirit,  
in which also he went and made a proclamation to the spirits in prison.  
In former times these did not obey,  
when God waited patiently in the days of Noah,  
during the building of the ark,  
in which a few, that is, eight persons,  
were saved through water.  
Baptism, which this prefigured, now saves you—  
not as a removal of dirt from the body,  
but as an appeal to God for a good conscience  
through the resurrection of Jesus Christ,  
who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God,  
with angels, authorities, and powers made subject to him.

## **GOSPEL (NRSV)**

### **A reading from the holy gospel according to Mark 1:12–15**

After Jesus was baptized,  
the Spirit drove him out into the wilderness.  
He was in the wilderness forty days,  
tempted by Satan;  
and he was with the wild beasts;  
and the angels waited on him.

Now 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."

## **Concluding Prayer**

### **Prayer over the People (First Sunday of Lent)**

May bountiful blessing, O Lord, we pray,  
come down upon us, your people,  
that hope may grow in tribulation,  
virtue be strengthened in temptation,  
and eternal redemption be assured.  
Through Christ our Lord.

**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 Prayer over the People for the First Sunday of Lent, Roman Missal p. 243)