

SUNDAY READINGS

READ AT HOME

Second Sunday of Lent

Year B

25 February 2024



Collect

O God, who have commanded us
to listen to your beloved Son,
be pleased, we pray,
to nourish us inwardly by your word,
that, with spiritual sight made pure,
we may rejoice to behold your glory.
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 century or so since Freud published his works on the human psyche, generations of human beings have become accustomed to exploring their inner world of drives, desires and motives. For all who take this habit for granted, the gospels offer frustratingly little insight into the inner life of Jesus. Our questions are not those of the evangelists. All the same it does seem plausible to argue that three moments in the gospel story are decisive for Jesus' identity and mission. His baptism gives birth to his public preaching, his Gethsemane prayer sets the seal on his death, and his transfiguration is confirmation he's on the right path. These three watershed moments are inter-related, as study of the gospel accounts will show. Today's story offers a glimpse of glory even as it calls on us to come down from the mountain.

A reading from the book of Genesis

22:1–2, 9–13, 15–18

God put Abraham to the test. 'Abraham, Abraham' he called. 'Here I am' he replied. 'Take your son,' God said 'your only child Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah. There you shall offer him as a burnt offering, on a mountain I will point out to you.'

When they arrived at the place God had pointed out to him, Abraham built an altar there and arranged the wood. Then he stretched out his hand and seized the knife to kill his son. But the angel of the Lord called to him from heaven, 'Abraham, Abraham' he said. 'I am here' he replied. 'Do not raise your hand against the boy' the angel said. 'Do not harm him, for now I know you fear God. You have not refused me your son, your only son.' Then looking up, Abraham saw a ram caught by its horns in a bush. Abraham took the ram and offered it as a burnt-offering in place of his son.

The angel of the Lord called Abraham a second time from heaven. 'I swear by my own self - it is the Lord who speaks - because you have done this, because you have not refused me your son, your only son, I will shower blessings on you, I will make your descendants as many as the stars of heaven and the grains of sand on the seashore. Your descendants shall gain possession of the gates of their enemies. All the nations of the earth shall bless themselves by your descendants, as a reward for your obedience.'

Responsorial Psalm

Ps 115:10, 15–19

R. I will walk in the presence of the Lord,
in the land of the living.

I trusted, even when I said:
'I am sorely afflicted.'

O precious in the eyes of the Lord
is the death of his faithful. **R.**

Your servant, Lord, your servant am I;
you have loosened my bonds.

A thanksgiving sacrifice I make:
I will call on the Lord's name. **R.**

My vows to the Lord I will fulfil
before all his people,
in the courts of the house of the Lord,
in your midst, O Jerusalem. **R.**

First Reading

This story is often called "The Sacrifice of Isaac," but such a title is misleading. Isaac is spared, not sacrificed. In Jewish and Islamic tradition it's called "The Binding of Isaac," referring to Abraham's tying up of Isaac before placing him on the altar. It might well be named "The Sacrifice of Abraham" since the patriarch is being asked to surrender both his son and his hope of descendants. But "The Testing of Abraham" best captures the essence of the story.

It's one of the most emotionally powerful and dramatic stories of the entire Bible. The growing pathos in God's naming of Isaac as Abraham's "son...your only child...Isaac whom you love" sets the scene for the almost unbearable increase in tension towards the climax of the episode. This is swiftly reached in the abbreviated lectionary text, allowing the longer half of the reading to be enjoyed in peace.

Readers may feel they are themselves caught in a bind. The story of its nature invites them to use their story-telling skills to dramatic effect, yet it also has the potential to offend modern sensibilities with its depiction of a God who asks for a child's sacrifice and a father who is willing to oblige. The happy ending doesn't whitewash these troublesome questions. In the end the reader's responsibility is to do justice to the text as it is, not to protect the assembly from its impact. It's a time-honoured story revered by all three Abrahamic faiths. From New Testament times, Christians have drawn on this story to interpret the sacrifice of Christ (cf. the second reading and Heb 11:17-10).

Responsorial Psalm

Psalm 115/116 is a song of thanksgiving offered by one who has been saved from a kind of death. Though it's Isaac who has been spared from being sacrificed in the first reading, the opening words of the first stanza – "I trusted, even when I said: 'I am sorely afflicted'" – sum up the righteous virtue of Abraham.

The verses that form the responsorial psalm have been constructed from different parts of the original. Mention of a "thanksgiving sacrifice" and "vows... before all his people" suggest that the psalmist has responded to his deliverance with a public ritual in the temple.

The sentence – "O precious in the eyes of the Lord is the death of his faithful" – may puzzle the reader with its ambiguity. It is not meant to imply that the Lord takes delight in our death, but that in their dying the faithful remain precious to the Lord.

The response, taken from the verse that precedes the first stanza, is relatively long and will require thoughtful proclamation. It is both an expression of thanksgiving and a pledge to respond faithfully to God's blessing. The verses are deeply personal, yet uttered in the setting of public worship. As always with short lines, readers need to respect the poetic form and not merge the lines into prose statements.

A reading from the letter of St Paul to the Romans 8:31–34

With God on our side who can be against us? Since God did not spare his own Son, but gave him up to benefit us all, we may be certain, after such a gift, that he will not refuse anything he can give. Could anyone accuse those that God has chosen? When God acquits, could anyone condemn? Could Christ Jesus? No! He not only died for us - he rose from the dead, and there at God's right hand he stands and pleads for us.

A reading from the holy Gospel according to Mark 9:2–10

Jesus took with him Peter and James and John and led them up a high mountain where they could be alone by themselves. There in their presence he was transfigured: his clothes became dazzlingly white, whiter than any earthly bleacher could make them. Elijah appeared to them with Moses; and they were talking with Jesus. Then Peter spoke to Jesus. 'Rabbi,' he said 'it is wonderful for us to be here; so let us make three tents, one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah.' He did not know what to say; they were so frightened. And a cloud came, covering them in shadow; and there came a voice from the cloud, 'This is my Son, the Beloved. Listen to him.' Then suddenly, when they looked round, they saw no one with them any more but only Jesus.

As they came down the mountain he warned them to tell no one what they had seen, until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead. They observed the warning faithfully, though among themselves they discussed what 'rising from the dead' could mean.

Second Reading

Before he moves into a lengthy and anguished reflection on the failure of his fellow Jews to find faith in Jesus, Paul brings the first half of Romans to an eloquent close. He assumes the role of a barrister addressing the court in full flight, arguing the case for the surpassing goodness and faithfulness of God.

He poses a series of rhetorical questions, each of which implies a resounding "No!" He's intent on persuading his distant readers that God is on their side. The gift of his Son testifies to God's boundless generosity and mercy. Unlike Isaac who is saved from being sacrificed by Abraham, Jesus is not rescued from death but raised out of death. Above and beyond his saving self-sacrifice, Jesus remains a permanent advocate for us at God's right hand.

This short and exuberant text deserves to be delivered with enthusiasm. It's an energetic endorsement of God's love for us in Christ. Readers can afford to inject a degree of drama in its proclamation, coupled with wisely measured pausing.

Gospel

In contrast to his terse report of Jesus' temptations, Mark matches Matthew and Luke with a full account of the transfiguration. All three situate the event soon (ie six or eight days) after Jesus' first attempt to forewarn the disciples about his upcoming passion and death as the Son of Man. This placement suggests that the transfiguration was intended to give the inner trio of the Twelve insight into the divine plan.

The revelation unfolds successively via the mountain-top location (already suggestive of divine encounter), the sight of Jesus' glory, the testimony of Elijah and Moses, the cloud, and the voice from the cloud. Each of these is laden with meaning from the biblical tradition, yet their combined effect still fails to enlighten the disciples, as the rest of Mark's gospel makes clear. Mark has no equivalent to Luke's post-resurrection Emmaus story in which the travellers are rebuked for being "slow of heart to believe all that the prophets spoke" (Lk 24:25). Instead, his gospel ends darkly with the bewildered women afraid and silent (16:8).

For all its apparent ineffectiveness in Jesus' lifetime, the transfiguration story is richly rewarding for those who contemplate it prayerfully. Its links with key moments in the history of Israel and in the earthly life of Jesus, such as his baptism, agony in the garden and resurrection, are an endless source of inspiration. It sheds radiant light on the identity of Jesus as Son of God (1:1) and Son of Man (eg 8:31.38).

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.

SECOND SUNDAY OF LENT

FIRST READING (NRSV)

A reading from the book of Genesis 22:1–2, 9-13, 15-18

God tested Abraham.
God said to him, "Abraham!"
And Abraham said, "Here I am."
God said,
"Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love,
and go to the land of Moriah,
and offer him there as a burnt offering
on one of the mountains that I shall show you."
When Abraham and Isaac came to the place
that God had shown him,
Abraham built an altar there and laid the wood in order.
He bound his son Isaac,
and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood.
Then Abraham reached out his hand
and took the knife to kill his son.
But the angel of the Lord called to Abraham from heaven,
and said, "Abraham, Abraham!"
And he replied, "Here I am."
The angel said,
"Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him;
for now I know that you fear God,
since you have not withheld your son,
your only son, from me."
Abraham looked up
and saw a ram, caught in a thicket by its horns.
Abraham went and took the ram
and offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son.
The angel of the Lord called to Abraham a second time from heaven, and said,
"By myself I have sworn, says the Lord:
Because you have done this,
and have not withheld your son, your only son,
I will indeed bless you,
and I will make your offspring as numerous as the stars of heaven
and as the sand that is on the seashore.
And your offspring shall possess the gate of their enemies,
and by your offspring
shall all the nations of the earth gain blessing for themselves,
because you have obeyed my voice."

SECOND READING (NRSV)

A reading from the letter of Paul to the Romans 8:31–34

If God is for us, who is against us?
He who did not withhold his own Son,
but gave him up for all of us,
will he not with him also give us everything else?
Who will bring any charge against God's elect?
Is it God who justifies?
Who is to condemn?
Is it Christ Jesus,
who died, and indeed, who was raised,
who is at the right hand of God,
who intercedes for us?

GOSPEL (NRSV)

A reading from the gospel according to Mark

9:2-10

Jesus took with him Peter and James and John,
and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves.
And he was transfigured before them,
and his clothes became dazzling white,
such as no one on earth could bleach them.
And there appeared to them Elijah and Moses,
who were talking with Jesus.
Then Peter said to Jesus,
"Rabbi, it is good for us to be here;
let us make three tents,
one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah."
Peter did not know what to say, for they were terrified.
Then a cloud overshadowed them,
and from the cloud there came a voice,
"This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!"
Suddenly when they looked around,
they saw no one with them any more, but only Jesus.
As they were coming down the mountain,
Jesus ordered them to tell no one about what they had seen,
until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead.
So they kept the matter to themselves,
questioning what this rising from the dead could mean.

Concluding Prayer

Prayer over the People (Second Sunday of Lent)

Bless your faithful, we pray, O Lord,
with a blessing that endures for ever,
and keep us faithful
to the Gospel of your Only Begotten Son,
so that we may always desire and at last attain
that glory whose beauty he showed in his own Body,
to the amazement of his Apostles.
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 Second Sunday of Lent,
Roman Missal p. 252)