

SUNDAY READINGS

READ AT HOME

Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Year B

4 February 2024



Collect

Keep your family safe, O Lord, with unfailing care,
that, relying solely on the hope of heavenly grace,
they may be defended always by your protection.
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

The book of Job, from which we hear a fragment today, is widely regarded as a masterpiece of literature. Like the grain of sand that provokes the production of the pearl, the troublesome and age-old question of human suffering has given birth to epic poetry. For all its length and beauty, however, the book offers no conclusive answer as to why the innocent suffer and why injustice is rampant in the world.

Contending both with well-meaning friends (“Job’s comforters”) keen to bring him to his senses and with almighty God, Job resolutely defends his claim of innocence, all the while subject to a welter of emotions. In the face of God’s incomparable majesty, power and wisdom, Job is finally reduced to repentance and silence. We are left to wonder whether the only way we can hold together the world’s pain and God’s sovereignty is to surrender.

After wrestling with the painful issue of the fate of his fellow-Jews, Paul is prompted to exclaim: “How rich are the depths of God – how deep his wisdom and knowledge – and how impossible to penetrate his motives or understand his methods! ... To him be glory for ever! Amen” (Rom 11:33.36).

A reading from the prophet Job

7:1–4, 6–7

Job began to speak:

Is not man's life on earth nothing more
than pressed service,
his time no better than hired drudgery?
Like the slave, sighing for the shade,
or the workman with no thought but his wages,
months of delusion I have assigned to me,
nothing for my own but nights of grief.
Lying in bed I wonder, 'When will it be day?'
Risen I think, 'How slowly evening comes!'
Restlessly I fret till twilight falls.
Swifter than a weaver's shuttle my days have passed,
and vanished, leaving no hope behind.
Remember that my life is but a breath,
and that my eyes will never again see joy.

First Reading

The very size of the book (42 chapters), let alone the fundamental question with which it wrestles, would have given the book of Job claim for significant representation in the lectionary. Alas, that is not the case at all. In three years there are just two short extracts, one for today and another for the Twelfth Sunday this year. The latter is rarely heard because the vagaries of the Lent and Easter seasons severely limit the observance of Sundays 7-12.

More's the pity, then, that today's text is an unrelieved lament at the joylessness of human life. Job bewails the utter drudgery of existence. It is nothing more than a hopeless repetition of days and nights that offer no relief from toil and grief. These are sentiments found also in the book of Ecclesiastes (Qoheleth), but there they are offset by sunny breaks.

Even the connection with the gospel is tenuous. Today's reading from Mark does acknowledge sickness and demonic possession, but in the context of Jesus' power to heal. It bears good news, not bad. The upshot is that we get no glimpse of the poetry, power and beauty of the book of Job. Even though it doesn't resolve the problem of suffering, it does take us to heights as well as depths along the way.

Nonetheless, readers have the responsibility to proclaim Job's lament as we have it, without moderating its bitterness. The assembly must be allowed to hear Job's cry in all its anguish. As usual the NRSV text is gender-inclusive.

Responsorial Psalm

Ps 146:1–6

R. Praise the Lord who heals the broken-hearted.

or

R. Alleluia!

Praise the Lord for he is good;
sing to our God for he is loving;
to him our praise is due. **R.**

The Lord builds up Jerusalem
and brings back Israel's exiles,
he heals the broken-hearted,
he binds up all their wounds.
he fixes the number of the stars;
he calls each one by its name. **R.**

Our Lord is great and almighty;
his wisdom can never be measured.
The Lord raises the lowly;
he humbles the wicked to the dust. **R.**

Responsorial Psalm

With the psalm, the pendulum of human emotion swings from one extreme to the other. Job's black despair is suddenly replaced by the psalmist's exultant praise. Psalm 146/147 is one of the group of psalms (146-150) that bring the whole Book of Psalms to a happy conclusion. Each of them begins with an "Alleluia!" and the command to offer praise. All are energetic hymns that confess God's goodness and greatness.

The response, "Praise the Lord who heals the broken-hearted," contains an allusion to the grief-stricken Job, but nothing more. It's God's love, goodness, compassion, power and wisdom that are joyfully celebrated. One point of interest lies in the mention both of the exile and of stars of the sky. Together they bring the Babylonians and their belief in the power of the stars to mind. The psalmist happily affirms the supremacy of Israel's God who "fixes the number of the stars" and "calls each one by name."

Along with proclaiming the psalm in a suitably joyful tone, readers need to take care with the variation in verse length, from three lines to six and then back to four. Appropriate inflections and visual cues will guide the assembly in its praying of the response.

**A reading from the first letter of St Paul
to the Corinthians 9:16–19, 22– 23**

I do not boast of preaching the gospel, since it is a duty which has been laid on me; I should be punished if I did not preach it! If I had chosen this work myself, I might have been paid for it, but as I have not, it is a responsibility which has been put into my hands. Do you know what my reward is? It is this: in my preaching, to be able to offer the Good News free, and not insist on the rights which the gospel gives me.

So though I am not a slave of any man I have made myself the slave of everyone so as to win as many as I could. For the weak I made myself weak. I made myself all things to all men in order to save some at any cost; and I still do this, for the sake of the gospel, to have a share in its blessing.

**A reading from the holy Gospel
according to Mark 1:29–39**

On leaving the synagogue, Jesus went with James and John straight to the house of Simon and Andrew. Now Simon's mother-in-law had gone to bed with fever, and they told him about her straightaway. He went to her, took her by the hand and helped her up. And the fever left her and she began to wait on them.

That evening, after sunset, they brought to him all who were sick and those who were possessed by devils. The whole town came crowding round the door, and he cured many who were suffering from diseases of one kind or another; he also cast out many devils, but he would not allow them to speak, because they knew who he was.

In the morning, long before dawn, he got up and left the house, and went off to a lonely place and prayed there. Simon and his companions set out in search of him, and when they found him they said, 'Everybody is looking for you.' He answered, 'Let us go elsewhere, to the neighbouring country towns, so that I can preach there too, because that is why I came.' And he went all through Galilee, preaching in their synagogues and casting out devils.

Second Reading

From consideration of marriage, virginity and sexuality in chapter 7, Paul turns to the controversial issue of food offered to idols. The Corinthians have sought his advice as to whether it was permissible for them to eat it or not. The lectionary omits all of the short chapter 8 that introduces the problem, and also much of chapter 9 in which Paul asserts his apostolic authority. Today's reading picks up the concluding stage of his argument where he plays with the notion of freedom.

As we discover from his letters, Paul is not averse to boasting. Here his claim is that he proclaims the gospel for free. Ironically, he first declares that he himself is not free. He has no choice but to preach – it is his sacred duty. But by not charging for this service, unlike other preachers and teachers of his time, he is free of the obligations that fees might entail.

This in turn allows him to choose to be unfree, that is, to be "the slave of everyone so as to win as many as I could." This is not a strategy of ingratiating himself with different classes of people for the sake of social acceptance. It's a missionary tactic "to save some at any cost."

Paul is in argumentative mode here, justifying his methods. He wants to get the Corinthians to understand the freedom he enjoys and how he chooses to exercise it. He will go on to apply this to the question they have posed. Careful examination of how Paul develops his case will pay dividends for readers and the assembly alike. This is a reading to be delivered forthrightly.

Gospel

Jesus' willingness to do God's work on the sabbath continues with his cure of Simon's mother-in-law, whereas the people wait until the holy day is over before they bring the afflicted to him. Simon Peter's house in Capernaum – and perhaps Jesus' missionary base – has been claimed to be identified by modern archaeologists.

The cure of Simon's mother-in-law has an allusion to the resurrection. Mark says Jesus "helped her up," using a word that suggests being raised. There's also a parallel with the exorcism that precedes the cure. Just as the unclean spirit came out of the man in the synagogue, so "the fever left her." Mark again records that the devils Jesus cast out "knew who he was." His command that they stay silent testifies further to his authority over them.

By situating Jesus' prayer between a busy day of healing and a new round of travelling, teaching and exorcising, Mark makes it clear that this prayer is mission-oriented. There's nothing escapist or self-isolating about it. It's all about "why I came." This reading lends itself to lively and engaging proclamation. Well delivered, it can fuel missionary zeal.

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.

FIFTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

FIRST READING (NRSV)

A reading from the book of Job

7:1–4, 6–7

Job spoke to his friends:

"Do not human beings have a hard service on earth,
and are not their days like the days of a labourer?
Like a slave who longs for the shadow,
and like labourers who look for their wages,
so I am allotted months of emptiness,
and nights of misery are apportioned to me.
"When I lie down I say, 'When shall I rise?'
But the night is long, and I am full of tossing until dawn.
My days are swifter than a weaver's shuttle,
and come to their end without hope.
Remember that my life is a breath;
my eye will never again see good."

SECOND READING (NRSV)

A reading from the first letter of Paul to the Corinthians

9:16–19, 22–23

If I proclaim the gospel, this gives me no ground for boasting,
for an obligation is laid on me,
and woe to me if I do not proclaim the gospel!
For if I do this of my own will, I have a reward;
but if not of my own will, I am entrusted with a commission.
What then is my reward?
Just this:
that in my proclamation
I may make the gospel free of charge,
so as not to make full use of my rights in the gospel.
For though I am free with respect to all,
I have made myself a slave to all,
so that I might win more of them.
To the weak I became weak, so that I might win the weak.
I have become all things to all people,
that I might by all means save some.
I do it all for the sake of the gospel,
so that I may share in its blessings.

GOSPEL (NRSV)

A reading from the holy gospel according to Mark

1:29–39

As soon as Jesus and his disciples left the synagogue,
they entered the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John.
Now Simon's mother-in-law was in bed with a fever;
and they told Jesus about her at once.
He came and took her by the hand and lifted her up.
Then the fever left her; and she began to serve them.

That evening, at sundown,
they brought to Jesus all who were sick or possessed with demons.
And the whole city was gathered around the door.
And he cured many who were sick with various diseases,
and cast out many demons;
and he would not permit the demons to speak,
because they knew him.
In the morning, while it was still very dark,
Jesus got up and went out to a deserted place,
and there he prayed.
And Simon and his companions hunted for him.
When they found him, they said to him,
"Everyone is searching for you."
He answered, "Let us go on to the neighbouring towns,
so that I may proclaim the message there also;
for that is what I came out to do."
And Jesus went throughout Galilee,
proclaiming the message in their synagogues
and casting out demons.

Concluding Prayer

Solemn Blessing (Ordinary Time III)

May almighty God bless us in his kindness
and pour out saving wisdom upon us.

Amen.

May he nourish us always with the teachings of the faith
and make us persevere in holy deeds.

Amen.

May he turn our steps towards himself
and show us the path of charity and peace.

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 III, Roman Missal p. 714)