

SUNDAY READINGS

READ AT HOME

5th Sunday of Easter

Year B

28 April 2024



Collect

Almighty ever-living God,
constantly accomplish the Paschal Mystery within us,
that those you were pleased to make new in Holy Baptism
may, under your protective care, bear much fruit
and come to the joys of life eternal.

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

An accurate chronology of the apostle Paul's life and mission remains frustratingly elusive. In Luke's account, no sooner has the zealous Pharisee named Saul undergone his conversion than he's preaching boldly and impressively in Damascus, as he does soon after in Jerusalem. Then he disappears for a time until Barnabas brings him to Antioch (11:25). In the later Sundays of Easter (Year C) we hear something of their shared mission. But surprisingly, on no Sunday in the three-year cycle do we ever hear a word about Paul's subsequent missionary journeys, in spite of the fact that Luke devotes over thirteen chapters to them (15:36 – 28:31). This huge gap is left for individual readers or groups to fill for themselves. It's well worth doing.

A reading from the Acts of the Apostles 9:26–31

When Saul got to Jerusalem he tried to join the disciples, but they were all afraid of him: they could not believe he was really a disciple. Barnabas, however, took charge of him, introduced him to the apostles, and explained how the Lord had appeared to Saul and spoken to him on his journey, and how he had preached boldly at Damascus in the name of Jesus. Saul now started to go round with them in Jerusalem, preaching fearlessly in the name of the Lord. But after he had spoken to the Hellenists, and argued with them, they became determined to kill him. When the brothers knew, they took him to Caesarea, and sent him off from there to Tarsus.

The churches throughout Judaea, Galilee and Samaria were now left in peace, building themselves up, living in the fear of the Lord, and filled with the consolation of the Holy Spirit.

First Reading

The dramatic episode that precedes today's reading – Saul's experience of enlightenment on the road to Damascus (9:1-19) – had momentous consequences not just for the fledgling Church but for the entire history of Christianity. Strangely enough, neither it, nor Paul's subsequent re-telling of the story (in both 22:1-21 and 26:2-23), is to be found in the Sunday lectionary. There's further mystery too, in that elsewhere Paul offers an account of his visit to Jerusalem (Gal 1:18-21) that is markedly different from that of Luke.

Taking today's text on its merits, we find Saul (not called Paul until 13:9) in a kind of no-person's-land, in that he was at odds both with his ancestral community and his suspicious new companions. But once Barnabas, true to his name ("son of encouragement," 4:36), has introduced him, Saul preaches so boldly that he provokes a hostile reaction necessitating his being sent away for safety's sake.

Luke rounds out the story with another one of his upbeat summaries about the growth of the Church (in the singular, not the plural of the JB lectionary). This fulfils what Jesus had said to the apostles before his ascension (1:8), but with the additional mention of Galilee.

The reading is an action-packed narrative that pulsates with the driving force of the Spirit. Readers should readily deliver it with energy and authority.

Responsorial Psalm

Ps 21:26–28, 30–32

R. I will praise you, Lord, in the assembly of your people.

or

R. Alleluia.

My vows I will pay before those who fear him.
The poor shall eat and shall have their fill.
They shall praise the Lord, those who seek him.
May their hearts live for ever and ever! **R.**

All the earth shall remember and return to the Lord,
all families of the nations worship before him.
They shall worship him, all the mighty of the earth;
before him shall bow all who go down to the dust. **R.**

And my soul shall live for him, my children serve him.
They shall tell of the Lord to generations yet to come,
declare his faithfulness to peoples yet unborn:
'These things the Lord has done.' **R.**

Responsorial Psalm

Psalm 21/22 is an anguished prayer for deliverance that culminates in joyous praise. It is best known as the source of Jesus' cry of dereliction on the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me" (Mk 15:34). What we hear on Palm/Passion Sunday is the torment. But the psalm as a whole works its way unflinchingly through the agony until finally trust is regained and confidence restored. Today we pray only encouraging verses from the psalm's conclusion.

The response, taken from this final section, sets the tone immediately. The psalmist who began by lamenting human and divine abandonment is now re-united with both God and people and moved to praise. The scope of the prayer that follows is vast. It encompasses not just the psalmist, but the poor, God-seekers, the "mighty of the earth," and "all families of the nations." Its range extends beyond present company to "generations yet to come" and "peoples yet unborn."

The spirit of the psalm is consistent throughout and clearly suits the season of Easter. Readers who make its thankfulness their own will serve the congregation well. The one challenge they face is in the delivery of the long lines. They should not be hurried through. The assembly's response can be prompted at the right time by a suitable tone of voice and a glance.

A reading from the first letter of St John 3:18–24

My children,
our love is not to be just words or mere talk,
but something real and active;
only by this can we be certain
that we are the children of the truth
and be able to quieten our conscience in his presence,
whatever accusations it may raise against us,
because God is greater than our conscience and he
knows everything.
My dear people,
if we cannot be condemned by our own conscience,
we need not be afraid in God's presence,
and whatever we ask him,
we shall receive,
because we keep his commandments
and live the kind of life that he wants.
His commandments are these:
that we believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ
and that we love one another
as he told us to.
Whoever keeps his commandments
lives in God and God lives in him.
We know that he lives in us
by the Spirit that he has given us.

A reading from the holy Gospel according to John

15:1–8

Jesus said to his disciples:
'I am the true vine,
and my Father is the vinedresser.
Every branch in me that bears no fruit
he cuts away,
and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes
to make it bear even more.
You are pruned already,
by means of the word that I have spoken to you.
Make your home in me, as I make mine in you.
As a branch cannot bear fruit all by itself,
but must remain part of the vine,
neither can you unless you remain in me.
I am the vine,
you are the branches.
Whoever remains in me, with me in him,
bears fruit in plenty;
for cut off from me you can do nothing.
Anyone who does not remain in me
is like a branch that has been thrown away
- he withers;
these branches are collected and thrown on the fire,
and they are burnt.
If you remain in me
and my words remain in you,
you may ask what you will
and you shall get it.
It is to the glory of my Father that you should bear
much fruit,
and then you will be my disciples."

Second Reading

The letter of James and those of John are radically different in style, but the two authors agree on one thing. Faith is testified to by works of love. "I will prove to you that I have faith by showing you my good deeds," wrote James (2:18). Only "real and active" love can give the assurance "that we are children of the truth," writes John (3:18-19).

John links faith and love together later in today's passage. God's commandments are to "believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ" and to "love one another." Believing and loving go hand in hand. While simply put, believing in the name of Jesus is broad in scope. It encompasses the true identity of Jesus as Son of God and Word made flesh, and it acknowledges his active power and presence within the community of believers.

There are differences of opinion as to what John means by conscience and its accusations, but apart from this the reading is clearly expressed. It invites thoughtful delivery that allows the community to mull on the life it is called to, one of faith, love, trust and peace.

Gospel

John's gospel originally finished at the end of chapter 20, before another chapter and conclusion were added. In the same way, although Jesus' farewell discourse appears to end at 14:31 when Jesus says, "Come now let us go," it continues for another four chapters. Jesus first takes up and reflects on the traditional biblical image of the vine.

Today's excerpt from this section of the discourse falls roughly into two parts. The first and shorter part focusses on God's work as vinedresser. The second homes in on the inter-relationship between vine and branches, signifying Jesus and the disciples. Jesus exhorts the disciples repeatedly to "remain" in him. Perhaps echoing Sirach's reference to wisdom and the long life of its branches (Sir 1:20), Jesus makes it clear that the disciples can only bear fruit when there is a flow of life from vine to branches, that is, from him to believers. The counterpoint to this fruitful life is the need for pruning or cleansing. Withered branches are cast off, living ones are trimmed.

The primary emphases through this passage are mutuality, fruitfulness and divine initiative. John is inviting his readers to take Jesus' words to heart and dwell on them. It's to be expected that ministers of the word will find this a rewarding text to proclaim, especially if they allow time for the many short phrases to be heard and absorbed by the assembly.

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 OF EASTER

FIRST READING (NRSV)

A reading from the Acts of the Apostles

9:26–31

When Saul had come to Jerusalem,
he attempted to join the disciples;
and they were all afraid of him,
for they did not believe that he was a disciple.
But Barnabas took him,
brought him to the apostles,
and described for them how on the road he had seen the Lord,
who had spoken to him,
and how in Damascus Saul had spoken boldly in the name of Jesus.
So Saul went in and out among them in Jerusalem,
speaking boldly in the name of the Lord.
He spoke and argued with the Hellenists;
but they were attempting to kill him.
When the believers learned of it,
they brought Saul down to Caesarea and sent him off to Tarsus.
Meanwhile the church throughout Judea, Galilee, and Samaria
had peace and was built up.
Living in the fear of the Lord
and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit,
it increased in numbers.

SECOND READING (NRSV)

A reading from the first letter of John

3:18–24

Little children, let us love,
not in word or speech, but in truth and action.
And by this we will know that we are from the truth
and will reassure our hearts before him
whenever our hearts condemn us;
for God is greater than our hearts,
and God knows everything.
Beloved, if our hearts do not condemn us,
we have boldness before God;
and we receive from him whatever we ask,
because we obey his commandments and do what pleases God.
And this is God's commandment,
that we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ
and love one another; just as he has commanded us.
All who obey his commandments abide in him,
and he abides in them.
And by this we know that he abides in us,
by the Spirit that he has given us.

GOSPEL (NRSV)

A reading from the holy gospel according to John 15:1–8

Jesus said to his disciples:

"I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower.

He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit.

Every branch that bears fruit

he prunes to make it bear more fruit.

You have already been cleansed

by the word that I have spoken to you.

"Abide in me as I abide in you.

Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself

unless it abides in the vine,

neither can you unless you abide in me.

I am the vine, you are the branches.

Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit,

because apart from me you can do nothing.

"Whoever does not abide in me

is thrown away like a branch and withers;

such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned.

"If you abide in me, and my words abide in you,

ask for whatever you wish,

and it will be done for you.

My Father is glorified by this,

that you bear much fruit and become my disciples."

Blessing for Easter

May God, who by the Resurrection of his Only Begotten Son

was pleased to confer on us

the gift of redemption and of adoption,

give us gladness by his blessing.

Amen.

May he, by whose redeeming work

we have received the gift of everlasting freedom,

make us heirs to an eternal inheritance.

Amen.

And may we, who have already risen with Christ

in Baptism through faith,

by living in a right manner on this earth,

be united with him in the homeland of heaven.

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 Easter Time, Roman Missal p 712.)