

SUNDAY READINGS

READ AT HOME

Twenty-Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Year B

15 September 2024



Collect

Look upon us, O God,
Creator and ruler of all things,
and, that we may feel the working of your mercy,
grant that we may serve you with all our 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

The fierce 16th century theological dispute about faith, works and justification split the Church. It took nearly five hundred years for Lutherans and Catholics to resolve this Reformation conflict. In 1999 they signed a Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification. Two decades later it was endorsed by Methodist, Anglican and Reformed Churches. In view of what today's reading from James has to say about faith without works, it's worth citing what the Declaration says about good works:

"We confess together that good works—a Christian life lived in faith, hope and love—follow justification and are its fruits. When the justified live in Christ and act in the grace they receive, they bring forth, in biblical terms, good fruit. Since Christians struggle against sin their entire lives, this consequence of justification is also for them an obligation they must fulfill. Thus both Jesus and the apostolic Scriptures admonish Christians to bring forth the works of love." (#37)

A reading from the book of Isaiah 50:5–9

The Lord has opened my ear.

For my part, I made no resistance,
neither did I turn away.

I offered my back to those who struck me,
my cheeks to those who tore at my beard;
I did not cover my face
against insult and spittle.

The Lord comes to my help,
so that I am untouched by the insults.

So, too, I set my face like flint;
I know I shall not be shamed.

My vindicator is here at hand.

Does anyone start proceedings against me?

Then let us go to court together.

Who thinks he has a case against me?

Let him approach me.

The Lord is coming to my help,
who dare condemn me?

Responsorial Psalm Ps 114:1–6, 8–9

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

or

R. Alleluia.

I love the Lord for he has heard
the cry of my appeal;
for he turned his ear to me
in the day when I called him. **R.**

They surrounded me, the snares of death,
with anguish of the tomb;
they caught me, sorrow and distress.

I called on the Lord's name.

O Lord my God, deliver me! **R.**

How gracious is the Lord, and just;
our God has compassion.

The Lord protects the simple hearts;
I was helpless so he saved me! **R.**

He has kept my soul from death,
my eyes from tears
and my feet from stumbling.

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

First Reading

If today's reading from the book of the prophet Isaiah sounds somewhat familiar, that's probably because it shares verses with the first reading for Palm Sunday of the Passion of the Lord. Both are excerpts from the third of Isaiah's four oracles known collectively as the Servant Songs. These are powerfully moving passages found in various places in chapters 40-52 of Isaiah, collectively known as the Book of Consolation for the encouragement it offers the exiles in Babylon.

The servant is a mysterious figure who endures great suffering in the service of God. This person has been variously identified as Isaiah himself, Moses, another salvific individual, or the people of Israel personified. Parallels with the suffering undergone by Jesus have led to the songs being given a Christian interpretation. As we will hear in today's gospel reading, Jesus, like the servant, is anointed for a mission that provokes hostility and involves suffering but advances the cause of salvation.

We hear today of the servant's personal experience. He presents himself as a disciple who listens to the Lord, suffers severe physical and verbal abuse, but refuses to resist. "I set my face like flint," he says, in words that echo how Jesus "set his face to go to Jerusalem"

(Lk 9:51). This steely resolve gives him the strength to defy his accusers like a defendant well represented in a court of law.

There's pathos in the description of the servant's suffering, but the dominant tone of the text is one of unflinching determination, based on confidence in God's help. This is the spirit which will be conveyed to the assembly by a strong and assertive proclamation.

Responsorial Psalm

The different numbering of the psalms can easily give rise to confusion. The 1981 Jerusalem Bible lectionary uses the 1963 Grail edition of the psalms which follows the Greek and Latin numbering. More recent translations adopt the Hebrew. Thus today's responsorial psalm is listed as Psalm 114 but is now more commonly identified as the first and independent half of Psalm 116.

As we have it, Psalm 114/116A is an individual's testimony of thanksgiving for having been saved from mortal peril. The psalm does not identify the nature of this extreme danger. It could be an illness that threatened to be fatal or possibly a lethal assault. The latter, whether meant by the psalmist or not, would connect with the violent attacks suffered by the servant of God in the first reading.

The psalm is not addressed to God directly. It is in the form of a public declaration. Apart from the few lines referring to the threat of death, the psalm as a whole is a confession of faith and praise in God's goodness, justice, compassion and saving power. The final sentence provides the response. As usual with a two-line response, readers should avoid running the two phrases together. An upward inflection and a momentary pause at the end of the first line will alert the assembly to the fact that there is more to come. The overall tone of the psalm is one of thankfulness and confidence, but the second stanza should be heard as the heartfelt entreaty that it is.

A reading from the letter of St James 2:14–18

Take the case, my brothers, of someone who has never done a single good act but claims that he has faith. Will that faith save him? If one of the brothers or one of the sisters is in need of clothes and has not enough food to live on, and one of you says to them, 'I wish you well; keep yourself warm and eat plenty,' without giving them these bare necessities of life, then what good is that? Faith is like that: if good works do not go with it, it is quite dead.

This is the way to talk to people of that kind: 'You say you have faith and I have good deeds; I will prove to you that I have faith by showing you my good deeds - now you prove to me that you have faith without any good deeds to show.'

A reading from the holy Gospel according to Mark

8:27–35

Jesus and his disciples left for the villages round Caesarea Philippi. On the way he put this question to his disciples, 'Who do people say I am?' And they told him. 'John the Baptist,' they said, 'others Elijah; others again, one of the prophets.' 'But you,' he asked, 'who do you say I am?' Peter spoke up and said to him, 'You are the Christ.' And he gave them strict orders not to tell anyone about him.

And he began to teach them that the Son of Man was destined to suffer grievously, to be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes, and to be put to death, and after three days to rise again; and he said all this quite openly. Then, taking him aside, Peter started to remonstrate with him. But, turning and seeing his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said to him, 'Get behind me, Satan! Because the way you think is not God's way but man's.'

He called the people and his disciples to him and said, 'If anyone wants to be a follower of mine, let him renounce himself and take up his cross and follow me. For anyone who wants to save his life will lose it; but anyone who loses his life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.'

Second Reading

The elegant Greek in which the letter of James is written is put to sturdy rhetorical use. The author pulls no punches in tackling his imagined opponents. Today he mounts his case against those who claim to be believers but whose supposed faith doesn't find expression in good works. Like a skilled barrister in court he articulates their position then demolishes it. The truth he wishes to uphold is that faith of its nature issues in good deeds. Faith has no claim to authenticity if it remains an abstract proposition and doesn't lead to actions like clothing the ill-clad and feeding the hungry.

His assertion that faith without works is dead may seem to go counter to Paul's insistence that we are saved by faith, not the works of the Law. This is not the case. Each one is responding to different claims. Paul's letters generally begin with a theological response to issues in the community, then move into exhortation as to how believers should behave. Romans 12-15 offers a lengthy example of the works that flow from faith.

Today's reading might well be taken for a debater's script. It is full of energetic argument and as such offers readers the opportunity to deliver it with flair.

Gospel

Peter's profession of faith in Jesus as "the Christ" and Jesus' response to him is the turning point of Mark's gospel. Prior to this exchange, Mark has presented Jesus as an authoritative teacher and powerful healer and exorcist who astonishes and impresses the people (eg 1:27-28). No wonder there were various opinions about him circulating around the countryside. And perhaps no wonder that, in spite of Mark's occasional references to the disciples' misreading of him, Peter should acclaim Jesus as the Christ, meaning messiah, God's anointed. However, it's likely that in making this confession of faith at Caesarea Philippi, a shrine of pagan and imperial power, Peter is voicing a misguided hope in Jesus as national saviour.

Jesus quickly corrects him. He names himself "Son of Man" and speaks of the fate that lay in store for him. This is the first of three predictions of his passion and death. Each follows the same pattern: prediction, the disciples' misunderstanding, and teaching on the cost of discipleship. Not only must Jesus suffer and die, but anyone who wishes to be a follower of his must choose the way of the cross. It is hard for believers who have had two millennia of familiarity with talk of the cross to realise how shocking it must have first sounded.

This pivotal passage is laden with meaning. Its seriousness is enlivened by the interplay of narrative, dialogue and teaching. This makes it a powerful text to proclaim.

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.

TWENTY-FOURTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

FIRST READING (NRSV)

A reading from the book of the prophet Isaiah **50:5–9**

The servant of the Lord said:
"The Lord God has opened my ear,
and I was not rebellious,
I did not turn backward.
I gave my back to those who struck me,
and my cheeks to those who pulled out the beard;
I did not hide my face from insult and spitting.
"The Lord God helps me;
therefore I have not been disgraced;
I have set my face like flint,
and I know that I shall not be put to shame;
he who vindicates me is near.
"Who will contend with me?
Let us stand up together.
Who are my adversaries?
Let them confront me.
It is the Lord God who helps me;
who will declare me guilty?"

SECOND READING (NRSV)

A reading from the letter of James **2:14–18**

What good is it, my brothers and sisters,
if you say you have faith but do not have works?
Can faith save you?
If brothers or sisters are without clothing and lack daily food,
and one of you says to them,
"Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,"
and yet you do not supply their bodily needs,
what is the good of that?
So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.
But someone will say,
"You have faith and I have works."
Show me your faith apart from your works,
and I by my works will show you my faith.

GOSPEL (NRSV)

A reading from the holy gospel according to Mark **8:27–35**

Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi;
and on the way he asked his disciples,
"Who do people say that I am?"
And they answered him,
"John the Baptist; and others, Elijah;
and still others, one of the prophets."
Jesus asked them,
"But who do you say that I am?"

Peter answered him, "You are the Messiah."
And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him.
Then he began to teach them
that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering,
and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes,
and be killed, and after three days rise again.
He said all this quite openly.
And Peter took Jesus aside and began to rebuke him.
But turning and looking at his disciples,
he rebuked Peter and said,
"Get behind me, Satan!
For you are setting your mind not on divine things
but on human things."
Jesus called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them,
"If any want to become my followers,
let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.
For those who want to save their life will lose it,
and those who lose their life for my sake,
and for the sake of the gospel, will save it."

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. 715)