

SUNDAY READINGS

READ AT HOME

23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time

Year B

8 September 2024



Collect

O God, by whom we are redeemed and receive adoption,
look graciously upon your beloved sons and daughters,
that those who believe in Christ
may receive true freedom
and an everlasting inheritance.
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

James' plainspoken critique of discrimination between rich and poor in the Christian community brings to mind John Chrysostom's trenchant words in his homily on Matthew 14:23–36:

“Would you honour the body of Christ? Do not despise his nakedness; do not honour him here in church with vestments and then pass him by unclothed and frozen outside. Remember that he who said, ‘This is my body’, and made good his words, also said, ‘You saw me hungry and gave me no food’ . . .

“We must learn to be discerning Christians and to honour Christ in the way in which he wants to be honoured. . . So give God the honour that he asks for, that is give your money generously to the poor. God has no need of golden vessels but of golden hearts. . .

“What is the use of leading Christ's table with gold cups while he himself is starving? Feed the hungry and then if you have any money left over, spend it on the altar table. Will you make a cup of gold and withhold a cup of water? What use is it to adorn the altar with cloth of gold hangings and deny Christ a coat for his back? . . .

“Make your house beautiful by all means but also look after the poor, or rather look after the poor first”
(*The Divine Office*, Second Reading, Week 21, Saturday).

A reading from the prophet Isaiah 35:4–7

Say to all faint hearts,
'Courage! Do not be afraid.

'Look, your God is coming,
vengeance is coming,
the retribution of God;
he is coming to save you.'

Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened,
the ears of the deaf unsealed,
then the lame shall leap like a deer
and the tongues of the dumb sing for joy;
for water gushes in the desert,
streams in the wasteland,
the scorched earth becomes a lake,
the parched land springs of water.

First Reading

Chapter 35 of the prophet Isaiah seems to belong more naturally in the section often called Second Isaiah or the Book of Consolation. Chapters 40-55 are comprised of oracles intended to comfort and encourage the Israelites whose exile in Babylon is coming to an end. That appears to be the background for today's reading, a longer version of which is heard in Advent in Year A.

Isaiah's joyous evocation of a transformed world is intended to dispel the shame and despair of the exiles deported to Babylon. God is coming to save them. A new era is on its way. The wilderness will become a garden. Handicaps will be healed, as they are in today's gospel story.

This is a snapshot of a new world of homecoming, wholeness and fulfilment. It will make most sense to those who understand its background, but even those who aren't familiar with the story of the exile can't fail to be stirred by what this poem promises. Given its wholly positive spirit, it should be a pleasure for readers to proclaim. They will need to respect its poetic form and proceed at a pace that gives the assembly time to savour its heart-warming images.

Responsorial Psalm Ps 145:7–10

R. Praise the Lord, my soul!

or

R. Alleluia.

It is the Lord who keeps faith for ever,
who is just to those who are oppressed.
It is he who gives bread to the hungry,
the Lord, who sets prisoners free. **R.**

It is the Lord who gives sight to the blind,
who raises up those who are bowed down,
the Lord who loves the just,
the Lord, who protects the stranger. **R.**

The Lord upholds the widow and orphan,
but thwarts the path of the wicked.
The Lord will reign for ever,
Zion's God, from age to age. **R.**

Responsorial Psalm

Psalm 145/146 is the first of the five psalms, all hymns of praise, that conclude the Book of Psalms. Each one begins and ends with the exclamation "Praise the Lord!" and are known as the Hallel psalms. The second half of the psalm serves as the responsorial psalm today. It picks up and extends what Isaiah's oracle promised to those whose lives were challenged by a disability of one kind or another.

The first two stanzas begin with the phrase "It is the Lord" and the third in the same vein. It is the Lord alone who is faithful, just, compassionate, caring and protective. Those for whom the Lord cares are the oppressed, the hungry, the imprisoned, the blind, the just, the stranger, the widow and orphan – in brief, the poor and lowly.

The short response repeats the acclamation with which the psalm begins. The verses present no difficulty; on the contrary they give the reader the opportunity to pray them with confident faith.

A reading from the letter of St James 2:1–5

My brothers, do not try to combine faith in Jesus Christ, our glorified Lord, with the making of distinctions between classes of people. Now suppose a man comes into your synagogue, beautifully dressed and with a gold ring on, and at the same time a poor man comes in, in shabby clothes, and you take notice of the well-dressed man, and say, 'Come this way to the best seats;' then you tell the poor man, 'Stand over there' or 'You can sit on the floor by my foot-rest.' Can't you see that you have used two different standards in your mind, and turned yourselves into judges, and corrupt judges at that?

Listen, my dear brothers: it was those who are poor according to the world that God chose, to be rich in faith and to be the heirs to the kingdom which he promised to those who love him.

A reading from the holy Gospel according to Mark 7:31–37

Returning from the district of Tyre, Jesus went by way of Sidon towards the Sea of Galilee, right through the Decapolis region. And they brought him a deaf man who had an impediment in his speech; and they asked him to lay his hand on him. He took him aside in private, away from the crowd, put his fingers into the man's ears and touched his tongue with spittle. Then looking up to heaven he sighed; and he said to him, 'Ephphatha,' that is, 'Be opened.' And his ears were opened, and the ligament of his tongue was loosened and he spoke clearly. And Jesus ordered them to tell no one about it, but the more he insisted, the more widely they published it. Their admiration was unbounded. 'He has done all things well,' they said 'he makes the deaf hear and the dumb speak.'

Second Reading

Today's text from the letter of James makes uncomfortable reading. There's no beating about the bush as he zeroes in on the virus of partiality that can infect a faith community. This is the only place in the letter where Christ is mentioned, other than in the opening words. James' rebuke is wholly in line with Jewish teaching. In the book of Leviticus, for example, judges are instructed not to be partial (19:15). Another Jewish feature of the reading is its use of the word "synagogue" to describe the Christian community's place of assembly. Nowhere else in the New Testament is the word used like this.

Few people, devout Christians included, can claim to be innocent of discrimination on the basis of status or wealth. James' example of how an obviously rich person is deferred to at the expense of a shabbily dressed poor person is right on target. He seems to imply that the members of the community are neither rich nor poor, thus more likely to aspire to wealth than choose to be poor. Hence their vulnerability to the practice of unacceptable discrimination.

The final sentence of the passage echoes Jesus' endorsement of the poor in the beatitudes (Mt 5:3). In effect, there is an acceptable partiality – that of God's preferential choice of the poor. Readers may well feel they are cast in the role of prosecutor by this text. Some may even shy at taking the risk of self-incrimination. This should not deter them from proclaiming the reading in a forthright tone. They, like the whole assembly, are offered the opportunity to take the concluding promise to heart.

Gospel

Mark begins his story today with geographical references that are difficult to take literally. His intent may not be to trace Jesus' actual itinerary but to draw attention to his ministry in Gentile territory.

Neither Matthew nor Luke includes this healing story. It's a matter of speculation, but perhaps they were reluctant to record an event in which Jesus' procedure is similar to that of other healers of the time. He takes the man aside, employs physical remedies, and speaks in a language, Aramaic, that would have been foreign for Mark's readership. The difference, of course, is that Jesus succeeds in curing the man of his double disability, so much so that his renown spread far and wide. The acclamation of the crowd harks back to Isaiah's oracle which promised that the ears of the deaf would be unsealed and the tongues of the dumb sing for joy.

Those who have paid close attention at a baptism will recognise this episode as the origin of the "Ephphatha" ritual in which the infant's ears and mouth are signed and a prayer offered that the newly baptised will in time receive the word and proclaim the faith of Christ.

Mark has bequeathed a concise and vivid account of Jesus' healing of the man who was deaf and had a speech impediment. Well delivered, it should engage the assembly's attention and imagination.

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-THIRD SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

FIRST READING (NRSV)

A reading from the book of the prophet Isaiah 35:4–7

Say to those who are of a fearful heart,
"Be strong, do not fear!
Here is your God.
He will come with vengeance, with terrible recompense.
He will come and save you."
Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened,
and the ears of the deaf unstopped;
then the lame shall leap like a deer;
and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy.
For waters shall break forth in the wilderness,
and streams in the desert;
the burning sand shall become a pool,
and the thirsty ground springs of water.

SECOND READING (NRSV)

A reading from the letter of James 2:1–5

My brothers and sisters,
do you with your acts of favouritism
really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ?
For if a person with gold rings and in fine clothes
comes into your assembly,
and if a poor person in dirty clothes also comes in,
and if you take notice of the one wearing the fine clothes and say,
"Have a seat here, please,"
while to the one who is poor you say,
"Stand there," or; "Sit at my feet,"
have you not made distinctions among yourselves,
and become judges with evil thoughts?
Listen, my beloved brothers and sisters.
Has not God chosen the poor in the world
to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom
that he has promised to those who love him?

GOSPEL (NRSV)

A reading from the holy gospel according to Mark 7:31–37

Returning from the region of Tyre,
Jesus went by way of Sidon towards the Sea of Galilee,
in the region of the Decapolis.
They brought to him a man who was deaf
and who had an impediment in his speech;
and they begged him to lay his hand on him.
Jesus took him aside in private, away from the crowd,
and put his fingers into his ears,
and he spat and touched his tongue.

Then looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him,
"Ephphatha," that is, "Be opened."
And immediately the man's ears were opened,
his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly.
Then Jesus ordered them to tell no one;
but the more he ordered them, the more zealously they proclaimed it.
They were astounded beyond measure, saying,
"He has done everything well;
he even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak."

Concluding Prayer

Solemn Blessing (Ordinary Time II)

May the peace of God,
which surpasses all understanding,
keep our hearts and minds
in the knowledge and love of God,
and of his Son, our Lord Jesus Christ.

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 II, Roman Missal p. 715)