

SUNDAY READINGS

READ AT HOME

Thirty-First Sunday in Ordinary Time

Year B

3 November 2024



Collect

Almighty and merciful God,
by whose gift your faithful offer you
right and praiseworthy service,
grant, we pray,
that we may hasten without stumbling
to receive the things you have promised.
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

Those with sensitive ears might detect a certain resemblance between two potent sets of words. One is the age-old injunction to love with all one's heart and mind and soul and strength. The other is Vatican II's foundational principle of the "full, conscious and active participation" of all in the liturgy of the Church. These same switched-on people will be attuned to the on-going tension between prophetic loving and ritual worship. After all, didn't Jesus endorse the prophets' critique of sacrifice?

The Council saw them hand-in-glove. The liturgy, they said, was the "source and summit" of the Church's life. Living the gospel at home, in the work-place and in the public domain should deepen our desire to come together for shared prayer. And our shared encounter with the grace of God in common prayer should impel us to go forth and work for the reign of God. Easy enough to assert, not so easy to realise in practice.

There may be no simple remedy, but certainly much could be done to ensure that the liturgy is celebrated in such a way as to inspire daily gospel living. Here are a few goals to aim for: warmth of hospitality, real personal presence, graceful ministries, effective proclamation of the word, prophetic preaching, respect for symbol, uplifting song, pertinent intercessions. The overall ideal – Sunday Mass that one would never want to miss.

A reading from the book of Deuteronomy 6:2–6

Moses said to the people: 'If you fear the Lord your God all the days of your life and if you keep all his laws and commandments which I lay on you, you will have a long life, you and your son and your grandson. Listen then, Israel, keep and observe what will make you prosper and give you great increase, as the Lord God of your fathers has promised you, giving you a land where milk and honey flow.

'Listen, Israel: The Lord our God is the one Lord. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength. Let these words I urge on you today be written on your heart.'

First Reading

The faith-defining prayer that devout Jews recite twice daily is named after its first word, Shema, meaning "Hear" or "Listen." The full prayer combines three texts, two from Deuteronomy (6:4-9 and 11:13-21) and one from Numbers (15:37-41). Today's reading includes only part of the first one, which seems rather a pity. This is preceded by Moses' exhortation to the people to observe the Law in full. In what sounds rather like a transactional proposition, such obedience promises to bring the blessings of a long life, male progeny and material prosperity.

As in ancient times, the Shema Yisrael serves as a confession of faith in the one true God. The Israelites had come to believe that God was God alone, not simply the greatest of the gods. Furthermore, this one God had adopted Israel, delivered them from bondage and given them a covenant code of conduct. These blessings called for a total response of love, engaging one's whole heart, soul and strength. It entailed both inner allegiance and outer witness.

This text anticipates Jesus' citation of the Shema in today's gospel. The whole reading deserves to be proclaimed with a degree of solemnity, but the first part of the Shema calls for particular gravity.

Responsorial Psalm

Ps 17:2–4, 47, 51

R. I love you, Lord, my strength.

I love you, Lord, my strength,
my rock, my fortress, my saviour.
My God is the rock where I take refuge;
my shield, my mighty help, my stronghold.
The Lord is worthy of all praise:
when I call I am saved from my foes. **R.**

Long life to the Lord, my rock!
Praised be the God who saves me.
He has given great victories to his king
and shown his love for his anointed. **R.**

Responsorial Psalm

Psalm 17/18 is a long and complex psalm (reproduced in 2 Samuel 22) in which the king gives thanks for deliverance and victory. He extols the God in whom Moses and the people of Israel have put their faith. The response reproduces the first line of the psalm and forges an immediate link with the opening of the Shema that we have just heard.

The first stanza comes from the very beginning of the psalm, the second from its concluding verses. What links these two extracts together is the image of God as rock. Rock suggests security, reliability and safety, but in an active rather than a passive sense. In spite of the defensive connotations of the associated imagery – fortress, refuge, shield, stronghold – God is a rock who saves and leads to victory.

The response and psalm verses are all in the same mode of loving praise. Readers simply need to guide the assembly through to the end of the six-line stanza.

A reading from the letter to the Hebrews 7:23–28

There used to be a great number of priests under the former covenant, because death put an end to each one of them; but this one, Christ, because he remains for ever, can never lose his priesthood. It follows then, that his power to save is utterly certain, since he is living for ever to intercede for all who come to God through him.

To suit us, the ideal high priest would have to be holy, innocent and uncontaminated, beyond the influence of sinners, and raised up above the heavens; one who would not need to offer sacrifices every day, as the other high priests do for their own sins and then for those of the people, because he has done this once and for all by offering himself. The Law appoints high priests who are men subject to weakness; but the promise on oath, which came after the Law, appointed the Son who is made perfect for ever.

A reading from the holy Gospel according to Mark

12:28–34

One of the scribes came up to Jesus and put a question to him, 'Which is the first of all the commandments?' Jesus replied, 'This is the first: Listen, Israel, the Lord our God is the one Lord, and you must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind and with all your strength. The second is this: You must love your neighbour as yourself. There is no commandment greater than these.' The scribe said to him, 'Well spoken, master; what you have said is true: that he is one and there is no other. To love with all your heart, with all your understanding and strength and to love your neighbour as yourself, this is far more important than any holocaust or sacrifice.' Jesus, seeing how wisely he had spoken said, 'You are not far from the kingdom of God.' And after that no one dared to question him any more.

Second Reading

The whole of chapter seven in the letter to the Hebrews is an imaginative treatment of two Old Testament texts. The first, Genesis 14:18-19, introduces the enigmatic figure of Melchizedek, priest and king. The second, Psalm 109/110:4, picks up on this: "The Lord has sworn an oath he will not change. 'You are a priest for ever, a priest like Melchizedek of old.'" This is the oath referred to at the end of today's reading.

The lectionary bypasses much of the author's complex argumentation. It includes just one passage whose point is relatively clear. Unlike the priests of old who came and went and who had to keep offering sacrifice for their own sins as well as those of others, Christ is the unique eternal priest whose intercession for sinners is never-ending.

Two Sundays ago, the author made the point that Jesus was "tempted in every way that we are, though he is without sin" (4:15). Today he expounds on Christ's sinlessness. Priests under the Law were "subject to weakness" but, as the ideal high priest, Christ is "holy, innocent and uncontaminated . . . the Son who is made perfect for ever."

This is not an easy text for the assembly to grasp. Its style of reasoning is unfamiliar to today's believers. Nor is it easy for readers to proclaim, with its heavily laden sentences. They will really need to study it carefully, be clear in their own minds how the argument proceeds, and deliver it with deliberation and clarity so as to maximise the chances their listeners will get its message.

Gospel

The lectionary doesn't repeat the story of Jesus' acclaimed entry into Jerusalem. That's told on Palm Sunday. At this point it proceeds with two episodes from the section of the gospel (chs 11 and 12) that Mark devotes to Jesus' final activities in Jerusalem. This is followed by an episode from Jesus' discourse on the end times. These will bring the cycle of readings from Mark to a close for this liturgical year.

Today's story is surprisingly mild, considering the deepening tension and hostility that Jesus is facing. The scribe who questions Jesus appears not to do it out of malice or with hidden motives. He simply seeks Jesus' opinion about a commonly discussed issue of the time. Jesus responds straightforwardly. In drawing together the commandments to love God and neighbour (Dt 6:4-5 and Lv 19:18), Jesus may not have broken new ground; the combination was possibly already in circulation among scholars of the Law.

The scribe's reply reaffirms the priority of love over ritual worship, just as Jesus, and Hosea before him, had done. They both declared mercy to be more important than sacrifice (Hos 6:6; Mt 9:13 and 12:7). None of these assertions renders ritual redundant, only secondary to the living out of love. It is noteworthy that Jesus tells the scribe he is "not far from the kingdom of God" even though he has not professed any faith in Jesus. The next time Jesus is questioned it will be a hostile interrogation by the high priest and religious authorities (Mk 14:53-65).

For all its familiarity, this gospel text remains fundamental. Its importance should be reflected in the authoritative way it is proclaimed.

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.

THIRTY-FIRST SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

FIRST READING (NRSV)

A reading from the book of Deuteronomy 6:2–6

Moses spoke to the people:

"May you and your children and your children's children
fear the Lord your God all the days of your life,
and keep all his decrees
and his commandments that I am commanding you,
so that your days may be long.

"Hear therefore, O Israel, and observe them diligently,
so that it may go well with you,
and so that you may multiply greatly in a land
flowing with milk and honey,
as the Lord, the God of your ancestors, has promised you.

"Hear; O Israel:

The Lord is our God, the Lord alone.

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart,
and with all your soul, and with all your might.

Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart."

SECOND READING (NRSV)

A reading from the letter to the Hebrews 7:23–28

The priests of the first covenant were many in number,
because they were prevented by death from continuing in office;
but Jesus holds his priesthood permanently,
because he continues forever.

Consequently he is able for all time
to save those who approach God through him,
since he always lives to make intercession for them.

For it was fitting that we should have such a high priest,
holy, blameless, undefiled, separated from sinners,
and exalted above the heavens.

Unlike the other high priests,
he has no need to offer sacrifices day after day,
first for his own sins,
and then for those of the people;
this he did once for all when he offered himself.

For the law appoints as high priests
those who are subject to weakness,
but the word of the oath,
which came later than the law,
appoints a Son who has been made perfect forever.

GOSPEL (NRSV)

A reading from the holy gospel according to Mark 12:28–34

One of the scribes came near
and heard the religious authorities disputing with one another;
and seeing that Jesus answered them well,
he asked him,

"Which commandment is the first of all?"

Jesus answered, "The first is,
'Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one;
you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart,
and with all your soul, and with all your mind,
and with all your strength.'
"The second is this,
'You shall love your neighbour as yourself.'
There is no other commandment greater than these."
Then the scribe said to him,
"You are right, Teacher;
you have truly said that 'he is one, and besides him there is no other';
and 'to love him with all the heart,
and with all the understanding, and with all the strength,'
and 'to love one's neighbour as oneself,'—
this is much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices."
When Jesus saw that the scribe answered wisely, he said to him,
"You are not far from the kingdom of God."
After that no one dared to ask Jesus any question.

Concluding Prayer

Solemn Blessing (Ordinary Time IV)

May the God of all consolation order our days in his peace
and grant us the gifts of his blessing.

Amen.

May he free us always from every distress
and confirm our hearts in his love.

Amen.

So that on this life's journey
we may be effective in good works,
rich in the gifts of hope, faith and charity,
and may come happily to eternal life.

Amen.

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 IV, Roman Missal p. 716)