

# <sup>1</sup> **SUNDAY READINGS** READ AT HOME

Eleventh Sunday in Ordinary Time

Year B

16 June 2024



## **Collect**

O God, strength of those who hope in you,  
graciously hear our pleas,  
and, since without you mortal frailty can do nothing,  
grant us always the help of your grace,  
that in following your commands  
we may please you by our resolve and our deeds.  
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**

Today Jesus offers two parables to show what the kingdom of God is like. Popular Spanish theologian, José A. Pagola, wrote this about the kingdom of God. "Following the tradition of the great prophets, Jesus understood the reign of God as a reign of life and peace. His God was a 'friend of life' . . . All his activities were aimed at establishing a healthier society: his rebellion against pathological religious attitudes such as legalism, rigorism, or the meaningless cult of righteousness; his efforts towards justice and solidarity; his offer of forgiveness to people overwhelmed by guilt; his embrace of people abused by life or society; his determination to liberate them all from fear and security for a life of absolute trust in God. Healing, liberating from evil, lifting out of depression, reprimanding the religious leaders, building a more friendly society, were all paths toward the reign of God. These are the paths that Jesus followed" (José A. Pagola, *Jesus: An Historical Approximation*. Miami, Convivium Press, 2011, 110-11).

The Lord says this:

'From the top of the cedar,  
 from the highest branch I will take a shoot  
 and plant it myself on a very high mountain.  
 I will plant it on the high mountain of Israel.  
 It will sprout branches and bear fruit,  
 and become a noble cedar.  
 Every kind of bird will live beneath it,  
 every winged creature rest  
     in the shade of its branches.  
 And every tree of the field will learn  
 that I, the Lord, am the one  
 who stunts tall trees and makes the low ones grow,  
 who withers green trees  
     and makes the withered green.  
 I, the Lord, have spoken, and I will do it.'

### First Reading

This oracle from the prophet Ezekiel appeals to our visual imagination. The divine voice invites us to picture a seedling of cedar being planted on the top of a high mountain. There it thrives until it becomes a towering tree. A multitude of birds finds shelter in its outspread branches. In sketching this scene so simply yet vividly for us, Israel's Lord communicates his sovereign power.

The challenge for both reader and assembly is to make sense of a text that has no context. Even those who tune in quickly to its evocative style are likely to find themselves puzzled. The curious who check it out will find that this short reading concludes a kind of parable that takes up the whole of chapter 37 in the book of Ezekiel. It's a complex piece of story-telling that interprets how Jerusalem was overrun by the Babylonians around the year 587 BC. God is the key player in the drama, along with the king of Babylon, the kings of Judaea and the Pharaoh of Egypt, none of whom are named. It's a story of the inter-play of divine and human agency.

None of this background is provided for the praying community. The reason for the reading's selection will only become clear when the gospel story of the mustard seed is read. The best that readers can do is to proclaim the text with clarity and at a sufficiently moderate pace that allows the assembly time to visualise the scene. The conclusion – "I, the Lord, have spoken, and I will do it" – asserts God's sovereignty and brings the reading to an authoritative close.

### Responsorial Psalm

Ps 91:2–3, 13–16

**R.** Lord it is good to give thanks to you.

It is good to give thanks to the Lord  
 to make music to your name, O Most High,  
 to proclaim your love in the morning  
 and your truth in the watches of the night. **R.**

The just will flourish like the palm-tree  
 and grow like a Lebanon cedar. **R.**

Planted in the house of the Lord  
 they will flourish in the courts of our God,  
 still bearing fruit when they are old,  
 still full of sap, still green,  
 to proclaim that the Lord is just.  
 In him, my rock, there is no wrong. **R.**

### Responsorial Psalm

Psalm 91/92 is a hymn of thanksgiving in praise of God's faithfulness. The opening and closing verses have been selected and combined to form the responsorial psalm. Flourishing trees are the metaphorical thread joining the first reading ("a noble cedar"), the psalm ("Lebanon cedar") and the gospel ("the mustard seed...the biggest shrub of them all").

The first verse, from which the response has been adapted, is a general invitation to sing of God's goodness day and night. The short second verse presents the dual image of palm-tree and Lebanon cedar (the latter proverbial in its own right). The long final verse expands on these images. It also adds the notion of the temple ("the house of the Lord") as the place where the just will flourish. A complementary image, that of God's justice as a "rock," brings the psalm to a close.

Readers will need to attend carefully to the differing lengths of the verses, using vocal and visual cues to prompt a timely response to the short second verse and to delay the response to the third until it has been fully proclaimed.

**A reading from the second letter of St Paul  
to the Corinthians 5:6–10**

We are always full of confidence when we remember that to live in the body means to be exiled from the Lord, going as we do by faith and not by sight - we are full of confidence, I say, and actually want to be exiled from the body and make our home with the Lord. Whether we are living in the body or exiled from it, we are intent on pleasing him. For all the truth about us will be brought out in the law court of Christ, and each of us will get what he deserves for the things he did in the body, good or bad.

**A reading from the holy Gospel  
according to Mark 4:26–34**

Jesus said to the crowd, 'This is what the kingdom of God is like. A man throws seed on the land. Night and day, while he sleeps, when he is awake, the seed is sprouting and growing; how, he does not know. Of its own accord the land produces first the shoot, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear. And when the crop is ready, he loses no time; he starts to reap because the harvest has come.'

He also said, 'What can we say the kingdom of God is like? What parable can we find for it? It is like a mustard seed which at the time of its sowing in the soil is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; yet once it is sown it grows into the biggest shrub of them all and puts out big branches so that the birds of the air can shelter in its shade.'

Using many parables like these, he spoke the word to them, so far as they were capable of understanding it. He would not speak to them except in parables, but he explained everything to his disciples when they were alone.

**Second Reading**

Paul's reflections on the trials and struggles of his apostolic mission have led him to view them in the light of the glory to come. In today's passage he uses a spatial rather than a temporal metaphor. It is based on seeing heaven as our true homeland. Our earthly life is thus one of exile. While in exile on earth, we walk by faith; when we reach our destiny, we shall see.

Paul unites heaven and earth by declaring that, wherever we are, we are full of confidence and are determined to please God. This reference to pleasing God gives rise to another image, that of "the law court of Christ," where we will be judged for the good or bad things we have done.

Paul's mind is so fertile that it is easy to be disoriented by the flow of his ideas. Today's reading is short but busy. Readers will need to study it carefully, especially the first sentence which makes up half the passage. It's complicated by detours, though the key point might be summarised simply: we are full of confidence while we live in exile and walk by faith. The reader's task is to proclaim the text with due deliberation and clarity so that the assembly is well guided through Paul's argument.

**Gospel**

Almost the whole of chapter four in Mark's gospel is devoted to parables, along with some explanation and commentary. Most of this material Mark has in common with Matthew and Luke, so the lectionary advances to a parable peculiar to Mark, that of the seed growing by itself. No explanation is offered, leaving the way open for interpretation as to how it illuminates "what the kingdom of God is like."

There are two agents at work in the parable. One is the human being who sows the seed, waits and watches while it grows, then brings in the harvest. The other is the mysterious energy in the seed that drives its growth and fruitfulness. This seems to allude to the power of the divine word. It is this, not human activity, that is the prime cause of the advance of the kingdom of God.

The second parable, that of the mustard seed, is in all three synoptic gospels. Strictly speaking the mustard seed isn't the smallest, but that's how the proverb goes. The way Jesus develops the parable, with its reference to all the birds that find shelter in the shrub, brings the passage from Ezekiel to mind (though a noble cedar of Lebanon might not be impressed by being compared to a scrubby mustard bush!). The point seems to be that humble and insignificant beginnings can have great outcomes.

Finally, we are left with the enigma of Jesus' use of parables. Is it to disclose or to disguise? The question remains unresolved, though the two parables we hear today appear to be aimed at encouraging the fledgling community.

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.

#### ELEVENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

##### FIRST READING (NRSV)

**A reading from the book of the prophet Ezekiel 17:22–24**

Thus says the Lord God:  
"I myself will take a sprig  
from the lofty top of a cedar;  
I will set it out.  
I will break off a tender one  
from the topmost of its young twigs;  
I myself will plant it on a high and lofty mountain.  
"On the mountain height of Israel  
I will plant it,  
in order that it may produce boughs and bear fruit,  
and become a noble cedar.  
Under it every kind of bird will live;  
in the shade of its branches will nest  
winged creatures of every kind.  
"All the trees of the field shall know  
that I am the Lord.  
I bring low the high tree,  
I make high the low tree;  
I dry up the green tree  
and make the dry tree flourish.  
I the Lord have spoken;  
I will accomplish it."

##### SECOND READING (NRSV)

**A reading from the second letter of Paul to the Corinthians 5:6–10**

Brothers and sisters,  
we are always confident,  
even though we know that while we are at home in the body  
we are away from the Lord—  
for we walk by faith, not by sight.  
Yes, we do have confidence,  
and we would rather be away from the body  
and at home with the Lord.  
So whether we are at home or away,  
we make it our aim to please him.  
For all of us must appear before the judgment seat of Christ,  
so that each may receive recompense  
for what has been done in the body,  
whether good or evil.

##### GOSPEL (NRSV)

**A reading from the holy gospel according to Mark 4:26–34**

Such a large crowd gathered around Jesus  
that he got into a boat and began to teach them using many parables.  
Jesus said:

is the smallest of all the seeds on earth;  
yet when it is sown it grows up  
and becomes the greatest of all shrubs,  
and puts forth large branches,  
so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade."  
With many such parables Jesus spoke the word to them,  
as they were able to hear it;  
he did not speak to them except in parables,  
"The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground,  
and would sleep and rise night and day,  
and the seed would sprout and grow,  
without the sower knowing how.  
The earth produces of itself,  
first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head.  
But when the grain is ripe,  
at once he goes in with the sickle,  
because the harvest has come."  
Jesus also said,  
"With what can we compare the kingdom of God,  
or what parable will we use for it?  
It is like a mustard seed,  
which, when sown upon the ground,  
but he explained everything in private to his disciples.'

## 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.

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 IV, Roman Missal p. 716)