

# SUNDAY READINGS

## READ AT HOME

Sixteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Year B

21 July 2024



### Collect

Show favour, O Lord, to your servants  
and mercifully increase the gifts of your grace,  
that, made fervent in hope, faith and charity,  
they may be ever watchful in keeping your commands.  
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

If Mark were a contemporary job-seeker, it's fair to say he'd be much more likely to be hired as a journalist than as a travel guide. His geographic indicators are to be treated with a fair degree of caution, even scepticism. There's a tiny example in today's gospel. Somehow the crowd not only guess where Jesus and his disciples are sailing to for their time alone, but even on foot they beat the boat's arrival. Naturally we happily suspend our disbelief at this and let Mark fire our imagination with his storytelling. The climax of the story is the action that Jesus is prompted to take by his insight into the real hunger of the crowd. It's for wise instruction. He proceeds to nourish them with his teaching, like Wisdom in the book of Proverbs (8:32-9:6). Jesus prioritises the crowd's hunger for truth over their hunger for food, just as he first forgave the paralytic his sins before curing his physical condition (Mk 2:1-12). Mark thus invites us reflect deeply on what our real hungers are, on what desires of ours are shallow and passing, and on what choices we must make to seek the truth to live by.

## A reading from the prophet Jeremiah 23:1–6

'Doom for the shepherds who allow the flock of my pasture to be destroyed and scattered - it is the Lord who speaks! This, therefore, is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says about the shepherds in charge of my people: You have let my flock be scattered and go wandering and have not taken care of them. Right, I will take care of you for your misdeeds - it is the Lord who speaks! But the remnant of my flock I myself will gather from all the countries where I have dispersed them, and will bring them back to their pastures: they shall be fruitful and increase in numbers. I will raise up shepherds to look after them and pasture them; no fear, no terror for them any more; not one shall be lost - it is the Lord who speaks!

'See the days are coming - it is the Lord who speaks - when I will raise a virtuous Branch for David, who will reign as true king and be wise, practising honesty and integrity in the land. In his days Judah will be saved and Israel dwell in confidence. and this is the name he will be called: The Lord-our-integrity.'

## Responsorial Psalm

## Ps 22

**R.** The Lord is my shepherd;  
there is nothing I shall want.

The Lord is my shepherd;  
there is nothing I shall want.  
Fresh and green are the pastures  
where he gives me repose.  
Near restful waters he leads me,  
to revive my drooping spirit. **R.**

He guides me along the right path;  
he is true to his name.  
If I should walk in the valley of darkness  
no evil would I fear.  
You are there with your crook and your  
staff; with these you give me comfort. **R.**

You have prepared a banquet for me  
in the sight of my foes.  
My head you have anointed with oil;  
my cup is overflowing. **R.**

Surely goodness and kindness shall follow me  
all the days of my life.  
In the Lord's own house shall I dwell  
for ever and ever. **R.**

## First Reading

In the early years of Israel's settlement in the Promised Land, leadership was exercised by spirited individuals called judges. When the people clamoured for a king, the prophet Samuel warned them about the consequences (1 Sam 8). Sure enough, many kings proved themselves false and faithless. Their failure to live up to the ideal of being trustworthy shepherds for the people ultimately led to the catastrophe of the exile in Babylon.

Jeremiah's oracle, spoken in God's name, begins with their condemnation but quickly becomes a word of great encouragement. God will bring home the exiles who have been scattered abroad, will make them prosper, and provide them with true shepherds. The metaphor then changes from shepherd to branch, meaning a shoot from the royal tree of David. This future monarch will be wise and honest and will rule with integrity. Which historical figure Jeremiah may be referring to is unclear, but his prophetic words came to have messianic meaning. Christians identify Jesus as this ideal king.

The reading thus falls into three parts – the diatribe against the false shepherd-kings, the assurance of return and rule by true shepherds, and the promise of a future king who would be divinely blessed. Each of these parts should be distinguished by the reader's tone of voice and a well-timed pause between them.

## Responsorial Psalm

In the light of Jeremiah's oracle and the gospel reference to shepherding, Psalm 22/23 is a natural choice for the responsorial psalm. Its over-arching image is that of God as Israel's shepherd. The people's familiarity with the responsibilities of earthly shepherds made it easy for them to think of God, and by extension the king, in these terms. Just as shepherds ensured their sheep were kept safe and fed, so Israel's God (and ideally the nation's kings) protected and nourished the nation.

Complementing the prime image of shepherding is that of hospitality. Generous provision for guests was (and remains) embedded in middle eastern culture. God may thus be readily thought of as a host who welcomes guests with scented oil and plies them with an abundance of food and drink. The buoyant spirit of the psalm is tinged with the realistic recognition of life's difficulties. Shepherds must lead their flock through "the valley of darkness," while hosts provide for their guests in "in the sight of (their) foes."

The principal challenge for readers is to pray this very familiar and much-loved psalm with fresh devotion. They will have served the assembly well if they give the impression the psalm has only just been discovered. They also need to take care with the two-part response and the two six-line stanzas. Thoughtful intonation and pausing will give the assembly the cues it needs to respond with confidence.

**A reading from the letter of St Paul  
to the Ephesians**

**2:13-18**

In Christ Jesus, you that used to be so far from us have been brought very close, by the blood of Christ. For he is the peace between us, and has made the two into one and broken down the barrier which used to keep them apart, actually destroying in his own person the hostility caused by the rules and decrees of the Law. This was to create one single New Man in himself out of the two of them and by restoring peace through the cross, to unite them both in a single Body and reconcile them with God. In his own person he killed the hostility. Later he came to bring the good news of peace, peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near at hand. Through him, both of us have in the one Spirit our way to come to the Father.

**A reading from the holy Gospel  
according to Mark**

**6:30-34**

The apostles rejoined Jesus and told him all they had done and taught. Then he said to them, 'You must come away to some lonely place all by yourselves and rest for a while'; for there were so many coming and going that the apostles had no time even to eat. So they went off in a boat to a lonely place where they could be by themselves. But people saw them going, and many could guess where; and from every town they all hurried to the place on foot and reached it before them. So as he stepped ashore he saw a large crowd; and he took pity on them because they were like sheep without a shepherd, and he set himself to teach them at some length.

**Second Reading**

Our readings from the letter to the Ephesians began last week with its long and rich opening prayer. That's followed by another beautiful prayer (1:15-23) assigned to the feast of the Ascension. Today we advance into the second chapter. Paul's theme is the unification of Gentiles and Jews, made possible by Christ's death on the cross. No longer are they separated by the observance or non-observance of the Law. They become one single Body in Christ.

There's a subversive tone to Paul's repeated reference to peace. As a Roman citizen, Paul knew full well that peace was attributed to the person of the emperor, as the famous phrase "pax Romana" implied. Instead he credits Christ repeatedly with the gift of peace and unity, achieved ironically by his rejection and crucifixion.

This peace is for those "who were far away" and those "who were near at hand." Paul draws on the prophet Isaiah here (57:19). Isaiah was referring to Jews at home and in exile; Paul applies his words to Jews and Gentiles who are now united in a body in which ethnic and religious markers have rendered irrelevant.

There are some difficulties of interpretation in the text, such as exactly what barrier has been broken down (was it, for example, the wall separating Jews and Gentiles in the Temple?) and what is meant by Christ coming later to preach the news of peace. But the principal challenge for readers is to help the assembly negotiate its way through Paul's heavily laden sentences. This is a wholly affirmative passage to uplift everyone. The NRSV renders "New Man" as "one new humanity."

**Gospel**

Like Matthew, Mark records two stories about Jesus feeding a crowd in the wilderness with a few loaves and fish, but neither of them is allocated to a Sunday in the lectionary. Both are replaced by John's single account which we will hear next week. Today we read how Mark sets the scene for the feeding episode.

In typical fashion he paints a vivid portrait for his readers. It's all breathless action. As soon as the disciples return, Jesus gets them to set sail for a quiet break with him. The people are not to be denied; they hurry on foot and anticipate Jesus' arrival. On seeing them, Jesus immediately sizes up the situation, perceives their hunger for wisdom and launches into a lengthy session of teaching.

Mark's report is brief but evocative. It brings to mind both the foundational story of the exodus journey and also the subsequent sorry history of a people let down by leaders who failed to shepherd them. Without saying so, Mark seems to be inviting his readers to see Jesus as both a new Moses and a new David, and perhaps also as true Wisdom.

Ministers of the word will find this an engaging and lively 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.

#### SIXTEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

##### FIRST READING (NRSV)

###### A reading from the book of the prophet Jeremiah 23:1–6

"Woe to the shepherds  
who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture!" says the Lord.  
"Therefore" thus says the Lord, the God of Israel,  
"concerning the shepherds who shepherd my people:  
It is you who have scattered my flock,  
and have driven them away,  
and you have not attended to them.  
"So I will attend to you for your evil doings," says the Lord.  
"Then I myself will gather the remnant of my flock  
out of all the lands where I have driven them,  
and I will bring them back to their fold,  
I will raise up shepherds over them who will shepherd them,  
and they shall not fear any longer, or be dismayed,  
nor shall any be missing," says the Lord.  
"The days are surely coming," says the Lord,  
"when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch,  
and he shall reign as king and deal wisely,  
and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land.  
In his days Judah will be saved and Israel will live in safety.  
And this is the name by which he will be called:  
"The Lord is our righteousness."

##### SECOND READING (NRSV)

###### A reading from the letter of Paul to the Ephesians 2:13–18

Now in Christ Jesus  
you who once were far off have been brought near  
by the blood of Christ.  
For he is our peace;  
in his flesh he has made both Jews and Gentiles into one  
and has broken down the dividing wall,  
that is, the hostility between us.  
He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances,  
that he might create in himself  
one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace,  
and might reconcile both groups to God in one body  
through the cross,  
thus putting to death that hostility through it.  
So Christ Jesus came and proclaimed peace  
to you who were far off  
and peace to those who were near;  
for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father.

## GOSPEL (NRSV)

### A reading from the holy gospel according to Mark 6:30–34

The apostles returned from their mission.  
They gathered around Jesus,  
and told him all that they had done and taught.  
He said to them,  
"Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while."  
For many were coming and going,  
and they had no leisure even to eat.  
And they went away in the boat to a deserted place by themselves.  
Now many saw them going and recognized them,  
and they hurried there on foot from all the towns  
and arrived ahead of them.  
As Jesus went ashore, he saw a great crowd;  
and he had compassion for them,  
because they were like sheep without a shepherd;  
and he began to teach them many things.

## 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)