

SUNDAY READINGS

READ AT HOME

Seventeenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Year B

28 July 2024



Collect

O God, protector of those who hope in you,
without whom nothing has firm foundation, nothing is holy,
bestow in abundance your mercy upon us
and grant that, with you as our ruler and guide,
we may use the good things that pass
in such a way as to hold fast even now
to those that ever endure.

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

1968 was the year in which the Vietnam War changed momentum, Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy were both assassinated, students protested, and astronauts orbited the moon. It was also the year that three new eucharistic prayers were approved for use in the Roman Church. In one of these, known plainly as the Third Eucharistic Prayer, there's a direct quote from today's reading from the letter to the Ephesians. We pray that we "may become one body, one spirit in Christ." Just as the Holy Spirit is called upon to transform the bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Christ, so we ask the Spirit to make us the living and spirited body of Christ. Catholics are well schooled to believe in the eucharistic presence of Christ, but are still learning to be conscious of Christ's ecclesial presence, his presence in the community of faith. There's a treasure here that's yet to be fully unearthed.

A reading from the second book of Kings 4:42–44

A man came from Baal-shalishah, bringing Elisha, the man of God, bread from the first-fruits, twenty barley loaves and fresh grain in the ear. 'Give it to the people to eat,' Elisha said. But his servant replied, 'How can I serve this to a hundred men?' 'Give it to the people to eat' he insisted for the Lord says this, "They will eat and have some over." He served them; they ate and had some over, as the Lord had said.

First Reading

The dramatic exploits and oracles of the prophet Elijah and his successor Elisha loom large in the two books of Kings. The figure of Elijah appears a number of times in the gospels but Elisha is named only once, on the occasion when Jesus responds to his critics in the synagogue at Nazareth (Lk 4:27). While none of the gospel writers mention Elisha in their various accounts of the feeding of the crowd in the wilderness, there is great similarity between these stories and today's one about Elisha.

Just as Jesus' disciples question him about how the crowd can be fed, so Elisha's servant queries his master. Elisha, like Jesus, responds authoritatively. As in the gospel stories, a large cohort is amply fed and food is left over. One distinctive feature of the Elisha story is that the loaves fed to the men are from the first-fruits. The author doesn't seem to be concerned that of their nature first-fruits are handed over into God's possession. This brings to mind Jesus' reply to the Pharisees when they complained about the disciples licking ears of corn on the sabbath (Mk 2:23-28).

Given the brevity of the story, readers would be wise to make sure they have the assembly's attention before beginning their proclamation. It would also be prudent for them to check the pronunciation of Baal-shalishah (omitted in the NRSV lectionary) and Elisha.

Responsorial Psalm

Ps 144:10–11, 15–18

R. The hand of the Lord feeds us;
he answers all our needs.

All your creatures shall thank you, O Lord,
and your friends shall repeat their blessing.
They shall speak of the glory of your reign
and declare your might, O God. **R.**

The eyes of all creatures look to you
and you give them their food in due time.
You open wide your hand,
grant the desires of all who live. **R.**

The Lord is just in all his ways
and loving in all his deeds.
He is close to all who call him,
who call on him from their hearts. **R.**

Responsorial Psalm

Several psalms, such as Psalm 144/145, are structured on the order of the Hebrew alphabet. This suggests completeness. In English we would say everything from A to Z. Of course this feature is lost in translation, and in any case most responsorial psalms use only a few verses of the original. What is clear, however, is that Psalm 144/145 is a joyful hymn of praise to God. Much of it is devoted to spelling out the reasons for such praise.

The one that stands out today, given the first reading and the gospel, is stated in the response – "The hand of the Lord feeds us; he answers all our needs" – and in the second stanza – "you give them their food in due time." Complementing this particular cause for praise are other things such as God's glory and might, plus generosity, justice and love.

Readers will note that the first two stanzas are addressed to God, while the third is directed to the community. Once the two-part response has been satisfactorily proclaimed and repeated by the assembly, the verses serve as a lovely prayer of thankful confidence in the goodness of God.

A reading from the letter of St Paul to the Ephesians

4:1-6

I, the prisoner in the Lord, implore you to lead a life worthy of your vocation. Bear with one another charitably, in complete selflessness, gentleness and patience. Do all you can to preserve the unity of the Spirit by the peace that binds you together. There is one Body, one Spirit, just as you were all called into one and the same hope when you were called. There is one Lord, one faith, one baptism, and one God who is Father of all, through all and within all.

A reading from the holy Gospel according to John

6:1-15

Jesus went off to the other side of the Sea of Galilee - or of Tiberias - and a large crowd followed him, impressed by the signs he gave by curing the sick. Jesus climbed the hillside, and sat down there with his disciples. It was shortly before the Jewish feast of Passover.

Looking up, Jesus saw the crowds approaching and said to Philip, 'Where can we buy some bread for these people to eat?' He only said this to test Philip; he himself knew exactly what he was going to do. Philip answered, 'Two hundred denarii would only buy enough to give them a small piece each.' One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, said, 'There is a small boy here with five barley loaves and two fish; but what is that between so many?' Jesus said to them, 'Make the people sit down.' There was plenty of grass there, and as many as five thousand men sat down. Then Jesus took the loaves, gave thanks and gave them out to all who were sitting ready; he then did the same with the fish, giving out as much as was wanted. When they had eaten enough he said to the disciples, 'Pick up the pieces left over, so that nothing gets wasted.' So they picked them up, and filled twelve hampers with scraps left over from the meal of five barley loaves. The people, seeing this sign that he had given, said, 'This really is the prophet who is to come into the world.' Jesus, who could see they were about to come and take him by force and make him king, escaped back to the hills by himself.

Second Reading

With today's short reading, the letter to the Ephesians changes mode from teaching to exhortation. The author, whether Paul or a later author writing in his name, spends the rest of the letter spelling out how the baptised should live out their faith. After the initial personal appeal – "I, the prisoner in the Lord, implore you" – the verbs become imperative – "Bear with one another" and "Do all you can."

Unity within the Church community was a great preoccupation of Paul's, as he makes plain in a number of places, such as Phil 2:1-11 and 1 Cor 12:4-11. There's no sign that his plea for unity here is prompted by distressing reports of factionalism, ambitions or animosity as was the case in other places. Nonetheless his entreaty is heartfelt. He then proceeds to an unsystematic list of the things that bind everyone together in one Body: the Spirit, peace, hope, the Lord, faith, and baptism, with the climax being reached in "the one God who is Father of all, through all and within all."

This text invites readers to make Paul's desire for peace and harmony their own and to draw the assembly into it as well. A proclamation that conveys the depth of Paul's feeling and the power of his theological vision will need to be strong and affirmative.

In passing it's worth noting that the beautiful prayer Paul prays in 3:14-21 is never heard on a Sunday. It will reward those who check it out.

Gospel

The feeding of the multitude is the only miracle story common to all four gospels. It's told six times – twice in Matthew and Mark, once in John and Luke. There's substantial agreement across all six accounts, along with differences peculiar to each one. The shared background is the exodus, particularly the gift of manna in the desert, and its ritual remembrance in the Passover.

John's is the most distinct version. He alone names Philip and Andrew, includes the Roman name for the Sea of Galilee (Tiberias), locates the event at the time of Passover, and alludes to the Elisha story via the barley loaves. Characteristically John makes reference to the "signs" Jesus gave, these being manifestations of Jesus' identity on the basis of which the whole gospel is structured.

More significantly, in John's telling of the story, Jesus is in complete command, just as he is throughout this gospel, even during his passion and death. John alone reports the crowd's identification of Jesus as the prophet to come, meaning either Moses or Elijah, and their desire to crown him as their king. And as we will see over the next four Sundays, John is unique in following the sign with an extended discourse on the bread of life.

The fact that the feeding of the crowd was remembered and retold so often testifies to the importance it must have had in the mind of the early Christian community. John has crafted his telling of the story with great skill. In spite of its familiarity, it deserves to be proclaimed with strength and vitality.

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.

SEVENTEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

FIRST READING (NRSV)

A reading from the second book of Kings 4:42–44

A man came bringing food from the first fruits
to Elisha, the man of God:
twenty loaves of barley and fresh ears of grain in his sack.
Elisha said, "Give it to the people and let them eat."

But his servant said,
"How can I set this before a hundred people?"
So Elisha repeated,
"Give it to the people and let them eat,
for thus says the Lord,
"They shall eat and have some left."

The servant set it before them,
they ate, and had some left,
according to the word of the Lord.

SECOND READING (NRSV)

A reading from the letter of Paul to the Ephesians 4:1–6

I, the prisoner in the lord,
beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling
to which you have been called,
with all humility and gentleness,
with patience, bearing with one another in love,
making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit
in the bond of peace.

There is one body and one Spirit,
just as you were called to the one hope of your calling,
one Lord, one faith, one baptism,
one God and Father of all,
who is above all and through all and in all.

GOSPEL (NRSV)

A reading from the holy gospel according to John 6:1–15

Jesus went to the other side of the Sea of Galilee,
also called the Sea of Tiberias.
A large crowd kept following him,
because they saw the signs that he was doing for the sick.

Jesus went up the mountain
and sat down there with his disciples.
Now the Passover festival was near.

When he looked up and saw a large crowd coming toward him,
Jesus said to Philip,
"Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?"
He said this to test him,
for he himself knew what he was going to do.

Philip answered him,
"Six months' wages would not buy enough bread
for each of them to get a little."
One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, said to Jesus,
"There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish.
But what are they among so many people?"
Jesus said, "Make the people sit down."
Now there was a great deal of grass in the place;
so they sat down, about five thousand in all.
Then Jesus took the loaves,
and when he had given thanks,
he distributed them to those who were seated;
so also the fish, as much as they wanted.
When they were satisfied, he told his disciples,
"Gather up the fragments left over,
so that nothing may be lost."
So they gathered them up,
and from the fragments of the five barley loaves,
left by those who had eaten,
they filled twelve baskets.
When the people saw the sign that he had done, they began to say,
"This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world."
When Jesus realized that they were about to come
and take him by force to make him king,
he withdrew again to the mountain by himself.

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)