

SUNDAY READINGS

READ AT HOME

Twenty-Second Sunday in Ordinary Time

Year B

1 September 2024



Collect

God of might, giver of every good gift,
put into our hearts the love of your name,
so that, by deepening our sense of reverence,
you may nurture in us what is good
and, by your watchful care,
keep safe what you have nurtured.
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

It may be tempting to dismiss the sharp debate between Jesus and the Jerusalem authorities about ritual impurity as obsolete and irrelevant. It is neither. The Second Vatican Council famously called the liturgy the source and summit of the Church's life and set in motion the process of its renewal. Surprisingly soon, new ritual books regulating the celebration of the sacred mysteries were published. Sadly, these have not given rise globally to worship that engages the whole community fully, consciously and actively in spirit and in truth. All too much liturgy is celebrated either carelessly or routinely. At the other extreme, a new legalism about ritual prescriptions stifles the spirit. Pope Francis laments both of these deficiencies in his 2022 Apostolic Letter on the liturgy, *Desiderio Desideravi*, already mentioned a few Sundays ago. He appeals to us to rediscover the beauty and power of the liturgy. Would that we longed for it as much as Jesus longed to celebrate that final Passover with his disciples!

A reading from the book of Deuteronomy

4:1–2, 6–8

Moses said to the people: 'Now, Israel, take notice of the laws and customs that I teach you today, and observe them, that you may have life and may enter and take possession of the land that the Lord the God of your fathers is giving you. You must add nothing to what I command you, and take nothing from it, but keep the commandments of the Lord your God just as I lay them down for you. Keep them, observe them, and they will demonstrate to the peoples your wisdom and understanding. When they come to know of all these laws they will exclaim, "No other people is as wise and prudent as this great nation." And indeed, what great nation is there that has its gods so near as the Lord our God that has laws and customs to match this whole Law that I put before you today?'

Responsorial Psalm

Ps 14:2–5

R. The just will live in the presence of the Lord.

Lord, who shall dwell on your holy mountain?
He who walks without fault;
he who acts with justice
and speaks the truth from his heart. **R.**

He who does no wrong to his brother,
who casts no slur on his neighbour,
who holds the godless in disdain,
but honours those who fear the Lord. **R.**

He who keeps his pledge, come what may;
who takes no interest on a loan
and accepts no bribes against the innocent.
Such a man will stand firm for ever. **R.**

First Reading

Love and law are the two intertwined themes of the book of Deuteronomy. In discourses that frame the body of the work, Moses extols God's love for Israel, demonstrated powerfully in the exodus from Egypt to the Promised Land. A central feature of that love (and the book) is the legal charter that God bestows on the nation. The Law is a precious gift that shapes the life of the people, assures them of peace and prosperity, makes them the envy of other nations, and bears witness to the uniqueness of Israel's God.

This message is summarised in today's short reading from Deuteronomy. While secular democracies today might take pride in things like the rule of law, freedom of speech, judicial independence and equality, ancient Israel revelled in its identity as the Chosen People. God's heart had been set on them, and the Law was evidence of this. It spelt out their obligations and blessings under the covenant God established with them at Mt Sinai.

Moses makes it clear that the Law is not an alien imposition on the nation but its lifeblood. While the reading is in the form of a solemn exhortation, its spirit is one of joyful gratitude and that's how the assembly should hear it.

Responsorial Psalm

It's perhaps a pity that the first line of Psalm 14/15 has been omitted. It reads, "Lord, who shall be admitted to your tent?" The psalmist's original intention may have been to suggest the Tent of Meeting where Moses spoke with the Lord during the years of wandering in the desert (Ex 33:7-11). Certainly, the ensuing mention of the "holy mountain" evokes the giving of the Law that Moses applauds in the first reading.

As the lectionary has it, the responsorial psalm begins with the question: "Lord, who shall dwell on your holy mountain?" The response answers the question in advance by declaring, "The just will live in the presence of the Lord." The psalm verses then proceed to spell out what it means to be just. It is to be without fault, to act justly, speak truthfully and refrain from slander. It is to honour the godly and practise integrity. These are all qualities of the Law-observing Israelite.

The psalmist's short but demanding list of ideals sums up what many of the prophets taught. Living justly is an essential pre-requisite for genuine worship, as Jesus himself reaffirmed. "Go and learn the meaning of the words: *what I want is mercy, not sacrifice*" (Mt 9:13, citing Micah). Readers may wish to consult other renderings of the psalm to see how the pervasive exclusive language can be dealt with, by using the plural for example. Any such adaptation needs to be prepared with care.

A reading from the letter of St James

1:17–18, 21–22, 27

It is all that is good, everything that is perfect, which is given us from above; it comes down from the Father of all light; with him there is no such thing as alteration, no shadow of a change. By his own choice he made us his children by the message of the truth so that we should be a sort of first-fruits of all that he had created.

Accept and submit to the word which has been planted in you and can save your souls. But you must do what the word tells you, and not just listen to it and deceive yourselves.

Pure, unspoilt religion, in the eyes of God our Father is this: coming to the help of orphans and widows when they need it, and keeping oneself uncontaminated by the world.

A reading from the holy Gospel according to Mark

7:1–8, 14–15, 21–23

The Pharisees and some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem gathered round Jesus, and they noticed that some of his disciples were eating with unclean hands, that is, without washing them. For the Pharisees, and the Jews in general, follow the tradition of the elders and never eat without washing their arms as far as the elbow; and on returning from the market place they never eat without first sprinkling themselves. There are also many other observances which have been handed down to them concerning the washing of cups and pots and bronze dishes. So these Pharisees and scribes asked him, 'Why do your disciples not respect the tradition of the elders but eat their food with unclean hands?' He answered, 'It was of you hypocrites that Isaiah so rightly prophesied in this passage of scripture:

This people honours me only with lip-service,
while their hearts are far from me.

The worship they offer me is worthless,
the doctrines they teach are only human regulations.
You put aside the commandment of God
to cling to human traditions.'

He called the people to him again and said, 'Listen to me, all of you, and understand. Nothing that goes into a man from outside can make him unclean; it is the things that come out of a man that make him unclean. For it is from within, from men's hearts, that evil intentions emerge: fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, malice, deceit, indecency, envy, slander, pride, folly. All these things come from within and make a man unclean.'

Second Reading

After seven readings in the luxuriant language of the letter to the Ephesians, the letter of James brings a marked change of style. Ephesians revels in the mysteries of the Christian faith and does so in high literary mode. James is in the tradition of Jewish wisdom and rarely makes explicit reference to anything Christian, yet it is suffused with the gospel spirit. While written in fine Greek, its moral message is expressed in terms that are often earthy and blunt. In fact, it is not so much a letter as a set of exhortations. There is no firm agreement as to the work's author, audience, place of composition or date.

Today's reading, the first of five, begins enigmatically. The author is responding to claims that people have been making to justify their sinful ways. They blame God for the temptation they experience. These false excuses are cited in earlier verses that we do not hear, so we are taken unawares when the author launches into his counter-argument – that only what is good and perfect comes down from God, the unchanging "Father of all light." He appeals to the Jewish tradition of first fruits – the setting aside of the first part of the crop or flock to acknowledge God's providence – to portray believers as a select group representing the new creation, perhaps by virtue of their baptism.

The author of James is passionate about the works that faith demands. Those who take God's word to heart must let it stir them to action. That means coming to the aid of the needy, typified traditionally by orphans and widows. The reading thus begins with a glance at the heavens but comes firmly to earth at the end.

It would help the assembly if readers waited until they were sure of everyone's attention before proceeding with the text. This opening pause can then lead into a thoughtful proclamation that allows the gathering to tune in to its particular style and content.

Gospel

After five excerpts from John 6, the lectionary resumes its journey through the gospel of Mark. Sometimes Mark is extremely concise, as in his very succinct account of Jesus' baptism and temptations. At other times he is content to write at some length and in detail about Jesus' actions or teachings. The latter is the case today. Mark first sets the scene. Jewish religious authorities from Jerusalem question Jesus about his disciples' failure to observe the prescriptions of ritual purity. They do not wash their hands after they have come in contact with something that disqualifies them from worship. It is worth noting that Jesus does not excuse his followers, nor does he criticise, much less condemn, the ritual purification to which every Jew was subject.

What he does is turn on the authorities and accuse them of elevating human traditions above the duty of sincere worship. In verses not included in the reading, he alleges that they exploit interpretations of their own to subvert the word of God. He is effectively questioning their legitimacy as interpreters of the Torah. Jesus then shifts focus from ritual to moral impurity. It is not the intake and digestion of proscribed food that pollutes, but evil desires that well up from the heart. The long list of vices he cites is a conventional one.

As always when an evangelist reports a dispute between Jesus and religious authorities such as Pharisees, scribes and elders, preachers must take care not to disparage them in any way that might be construed as anti-Semitic. An excellent resource on this issue is the Pontifical Biblical Commission's 2002 document *The Jewish People and Their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible*.

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-SECOND SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

FIRST READING (NRSV)

A reading from the book of Deuteronomy 4:1–2, 6–8

Moses spoke to the people; he said:
"So now, Israel, give heed to the statutes and ordinances
that I am teaching you to observe,
so that you may live to enter and occupy the land
that the Lord, the God of your ancestors, is giving you.
You must neither add anything to what I command you
nor take away anything from it,
but keep the commandments of the Lord your God
with which I am charging you.
"You must observe them diligently,
for this will show your wisdom and discernment to the peoples,
who, when they hear all these statutes, will say,
'Surely this great nation is a wise and discerning people!'
For what other great nation has a god so near to it
as the Lord our God is whenever we call to him?
And what other great nation has statutes and ordinances
as just as this entire law that I am setting before you today?"

SECOND READING (NRSV)

A reading from the letter of James 1:17–18, 21–22, 27

Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift,
is from above, coming down from the Father of lights,
with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change.
In fulfilment of his own purpose
he gave us birth by the word of truth,
so that we would become a kind of first fruits of his creatures.
Welcome with meekness
the implanted word that has the power to save your souls.
But be doers of the word,
and not merely hearers who deceive themselves.
Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father; is this:
to care for orphans and widows in their distress,
and to keep oneself unstained by the world.

GOSPEL (NRSV)

A reading from the holy gospel according to Mark 7:1–8, 14–15, 21–23

When the Pharisees and some of the scribes
who had come from Jerusalem gathered around Jesus,
they noticed that some of his disciples
were eating with defiled hands, that is, without washing them.

For the Pharisees, and all the Jews,
do not eat unless they thoroughly wash their hands,
thus observing the tradition of the elders;
and they do not eat anything from the market unless they wash it;
and there are also many other traditions that they observe,
the washing of cups, pots, and bronze kettles.
So the Pharisees and the scribes asked him,
"Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition
of the elders,
but eat with defiled hands?"
Jesus said to them,
"Isaiah prophesied rightly about you hypocrites,
as it is written,
'This people honours me with their lips,
but their hearts are far from me;
in vain do they worship me,
teaching human precepts as doctrines.'
You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition."
Then Jesus called the crowd again and said to them,
"Listen to me, all of you, and understand:
there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile,
but the things that come out are what defile.
"For it is from within, from the human heart,
that evil intentions come:
fornication, theft, murder; adultery,
avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness,
envy, slander; pride, folly.
"All these evil things come from within,
and they defile a person."

Concluding Prayer

Solemn Blessing (Ordinary Time I)

May the Lord bless us and keep us.
Amen.

May he let his face shine upon us
and show us his mercy.
Amen.

May he turn his countenance towards us
and give us his 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 I, Roman Missal p. 714)