

SUNDAY READINGS

READ AT HOME

Twenty-First Sunday in Ordinary Time

Year B

25 August 2024



Collect

O God, who cause the minds of the faithful
to unite in a single purpose,
grant your people to love what you command
and to desire what you promise,
that, amid the uncertainties of this world,
our hearts may be fixed on that place
where true gladness is found.
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

Most of those who, like Peter in today's gospel, take up Jesus' challenge to follow him do so in the setting of marriage and family. Many, however, may find some of today's reading from Ephesians "intolerable language." Here's what Pope Francis wrote about it in his apostolic exhortation, *The Joy of Love*, in 2016: "Every form of sexual submission must be clearly rejected. This includes all improper interpretations of the passage in the Letter to the Ephesians where Paul tells women to "be subject to your husbands" (Eph 5:22). This passage mirrors the cultural categories of the time, but our concern is not with its cultural matrix but with the revealed message that it conveys. As Saint John Paul II wisely observed: 'Love excludes every kind of subjection whereby the wife might become a servant or a slave of the husband... The community or unity which they should establish through marriage is constituted by a reciprocal donation of self, which is also a mutual subjection'. . . In marriage, this reciprocal 'submission' takes on a special meaning, and is seen as a freely chosen mutual belonging marked by fidelity, respect and care. Sexuality is inseparably at the service of this conjugal friendship, for it is meant to aid the fulfilment of the other.'" (#156)

A reading from the book of Joshua 24:1–2, 15–18

Joshua gathered all the tribes of Israel together at Shechem; then he called the elders, leaders, judges and scribes of Israel, and they presented themselves before God. Then Joshua said to all the people: 'If you will not serve the Lord, choose today whom you wish to serve, whether the gods that your ancestors served beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are now living. As for me and my House, we will serve the Lord.'

The people answered, 'We have no intention of deserting the Lord our God who brought us and our ancestors out of the land of Egypt, the house of slavery, who worked those great wonders before our eyes and preserved us all along the way we travelled and among all the peoples through whom we journeyed. We too will serve the Lord, for he is our God.'

First Reading

The book of Deuteronomy finishes with the highest praise for Moses (34:10-12) but Israel's divinely chosen leader was still fated to die within sight of the Promised Land. It was his successor, Joshua, who accompanied the people across the Jordan and led the conquest of the land. Joshua's death, unlike that of Moses, was one of fulfilment. His last act, which we read about today, was to seal the covenant relationship between the gathered tribes and the God of Moses.

The formality of the occasion is evident in the presence of "all the tribes of Israel" and "the elders, leaders, judges and scribes." They met together at the centrally located shrine of Shechem where Abraham had once built an altar (Gen 12:6-7), Jacob had bought land (Gen 33:18-19), and Joshua himself had already conducted a covenant rite (Jos 8:30-35). Joshua addresses the people, reminding them of God's deeds on their behalf, from the time of Abraham through to their possession of the land (24:3-14, omitted in the lectionary). He challenges them to choose between Abraham's old gods, the gods of the Amorites, and those of the Egyptians, on the one hand, and the God who had done great things for them on the other. The people reply with a summary of Joshua's recital and pledge themselves to serve the one true God. In verses we do not hear (25-28), Joshua confirms the covenant.

This report of a foundational event in the history of ancient Israel has a gravity about it that needs to be reflected in the serious but positive manner in which it is proclaimed. It anticipates the challenge that Jesus will put to his followers in the gospel.

Responsorial Psalm

Ps 33:2–3, 16–23

R. Taste and see the goodness of the Lord.

I will bless the Lord at all times,
his praise always on my lips;
in the Lord my soul shall make its boast.
The humble shall hear and be glad. **R.**

The Lord turns his face against the wicked
to destroy their remembrance from the earth.
The Lord turns his eyes to the just
and his ears to their appeal. **R.**

They call and the Lord hears
and rescues them in all their distress.
The Lord is close to the broken-hearted;
those whose spirit is crushed he will save. **R.**

Many are the trials of the just man
but from them all the Lord will rescue him.
He will keep guard over all his bones,
not one of his bones shall be broken. **R.**

Evil brings death to the wicked;
those who hate the good are doomed.
The Lord ransoms the souls of his servants.
Those who hide in him shall not be condemned. **R.**

Responsorial Psalm

Some short psalms are used in full as the responsorial psalm, but most of the time we pray a few verses selected from a longer psalm. By way of exception, the whole of Psalm 33/34 is prayed in sections over three Sundays, each time with the same response and opening verse. Today the final four verses of the psalm are added, resulting in a rather unusual five-stanza responsorial psalm.

The additional verses offer teaching about how differently God treats the wicked and the virtuous. The psalmist doesn't dwell for long on God's dealing with the wicked – just the first two lines in each of the second and final stanzas. The primary focus of the psalmist's instruction is on the just. With variations on a theme that are characteristic of Hebrew poetry, God listens to them, rescues them, saves them, guards them and ransoms them.

The psalm thus echoes the people's response to Joshua when they recount God's saving deeds. It also hints at the upcoming choice that Jesus' followers must make – will they recognise him as God's newest and fullest gift?

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

5:21–32

Give way to one another in obedience to Christ. Wives should regard their husbands as they regard the Lord, since as Christ is head of the Church and saves the whole body, so is a husband the head of his wife; and as the Church submits to Christ, so should wives submit to their husbands, in everything. Husbands should love their wives just as Christ loved the Church and sacrificed himself for her to make her holy. He made her clean by washing her in water with a form of words, so that when he took her to himself she would be glorious, with no speck or wrinkle or anything like that, but holy and faultless. In the same way, husbands must love their wives as they love their own bodies; for a man to love his wife is for him to love himself. A man never hates his own body, but he feeds it and looks after it; and that is the way Christ treats the Church, because it is his body - and we are its living parts. For this reason, a man must leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two will become one body. This mystery has many implications; but I am saying it applies to Christ and the Church.

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

6:60–69

After hearing his doctrine many of the followers of Jesus said, 'This is intolerable language. How could anyone accept it?' Jesus was aware that his followers were complaining about it and said, 'Does this upset you? What if you should see the Son of Man ascend to where he was before?

'It is the spirit that gives life,
the flesh has nothing to offer.

The words I have spoken to you are spirit
and they are life.

'But there are some of you who do not believe.' For Jesus knew from the outset those who did not believe, and who it was that would betray him. He went on, 'This is why I told you that no one could come to me unless the Father allows him.' After this, many of his disciples left him and stopped going with him.

Then Jesus said to the Twelve, 'What about you, do you want to go away too?' Simon Peter answered, 'Lord, who shall we go to? You have the message of eternal life, and we believe; we know that you are the Holy One of God.'

Second Reading

It must be said at the outset that this is a reading many readers would rather not proclaim. Its blunt patriarchal pronouncements – that wives should regard their husbands as the Lord and should submit to them in everything as a religious duty – are jarringly out of joint with contemporary views on male-female relationships. They are likely to arouse such a negative reaction that the positive, even revolutionary, points the author makes are likely not to be heard.

Readers have neither the responsibility nor the opportunity to interpret the text, but it may assist their proclamation if they themselves took the time to study it and uncover its deeper insights. It could well be helpful to consult a commentary. Nowhere in any of the recognised Pauline letters are wives called to be subordinate. Laying aside the author's culturally conventional assertions, common in the Greco-Roman social codes of his day, there are progressive points to be noted.

The opening sentence puts wives and husbands on an equal footing of mutual deference. Husbands are told to love their wives, and to do so after the example of Christ who sacrificed himself for the Church. They are also told, rather less nobly, to love their wives as they love their own bodies. The author's short exposé on baptism remains rather obscure. The parallel that he draws between spousal love and that between Christ and Church is visionary, yet not without its limitations.

Readers may well wish to play down or skim over the text's less palatable elements, but the better option is to proclaim it with due authority and allow the homilist to do the interpreting.

Gospel

As chapter 6 of John's gospel unfolds, the identity of Jesus' sparring partners changes from the crowd to the Jewish authorities and then to the disciples. Their reaction to his "intolerable language" may have been provoked by his insistence on eating his body and drinking his blood, but Jesus proceeds to raise a bigger issue – that of his heavenly origin and destiny. The question of his true identity pervades John's gospel through to its conclusion (20:31). Peter's profession of faith in Jesus as "the Holy One of God" is emphatic but perhaps not quite as full-blooded as the one he makes at Caesarea Philippi in the synoptic gospels (cf Mt 16:16) nor as complete as Martha's later in John (11:27).

It's disconcerting to hear Jesus say "the flesh has nothing to offer" so soon after he has insisted on eating his flesh, but it is consistent with what he said to the Samaritan woman about worshipping "in spirit and truth" (4:24) and with his refusal to let Mary Magdalene cling to him (20:17) because he was ascending to the Father. It seems that in John "flesh" can be either unspiritual or spirit-infused.

Jesus' statement that no-one could come to him "unless the Father allows" raises another question, that of how divine action and human freedom interact. John's gospel certainly highlights divine initiative. Like the Israelites put to the test by Joshua, Jesus' followers are faced with the life-defining decision as to how to respond to God's invitation. The proclamation of this gospel text presents the choice afresh.

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-FIRST SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

FIRST READING (NRSV)

A reading from the book of Joshua

24:1–2, 15–18

Joshua gathered all the tribes of Israel to Shechem,
and summoned the elders, the heads, the judges,
and the officers of Israel;
and they presented themselves before God.
And Joshua said to all the people,
"If you are unwilling to serve the Lord,
choose this day whom you will serve,
whether the gods your ancestors served
in the region beyond the River
or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living.
As for me and my household,
we will serve the Lord."

Then the people answered,
"Far be it from us
that we should forsake the Lord to serve other gods;
for it is the Lord our God who brought us and our ancestors
up from the land of Egypt,
out of the house of slavery,
and who did those great signs in our sight.
He protected us along all the way that we went,
and among all the peoples through whom we passed;
Therefore we also will serve the Lord,
for he is our God."

SECOND READING (NRSV)

A reading from the letter of Paul to the Ephesians

5:21–32

Beloved,
be kind to one another, tenderhearted,
forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you.
Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children,
and live in love, as Christ loved us
and gave himself up for us,
a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.
Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ.
Wives, be subject to your husbands as you are to the Lord.
For the husband is the head of the wife
just as Christ is the head of the church,
the body of which he is the Saviour.
Just as the church is subject to Christ,
so also wives ought to be, in everything, to their husbands.
Husbands, love your wives,
just as Christ loved the church
and gave himself up for her,
in order to make her holy
by cleansing her with the washing of water by the word,
so as to present the church to himself in splendour;
without a spot or wrinkle or anything of the kind—
yes, so that she may be holy and without blemish.

In the same way, husbands should love their wives
as they do their own bodies.
He who loves his wife loves himself.
For no one ever hates his own body,
but he nourishes and tenderly cares for it,
just as Christ does for the church,
because we are members of his body.
"For this reason a man will leave his father and mother
and be joined to his wife,
and the two will become one flesh."
This is a great mystery,
and I am applying it to Christ and the church.

GOSPEL (NRSV)

A reading from the holy gospel according to John 6:60–69

Jesus said to his disciples:
"Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man
and drink his blood, you have no life in you."
When many of his disciples heard this, they said:
"This teaching is difficult;
who can accept it?"
But Jesus, being aware that his disciples were complaining about it,
said to them, "Does this offend you?
Then what if you were to see the Son of Man
ascending to where he was before?
It is the spirit that gives life;
the flesh is useless.
The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life.
But among you there are some who do not believe."
For Jesus knew from the first
who were the ones that did not believe,
and who was the one that would betray him.
And he said,
"For this reason I have told you that no one can come to me
unless it is granted by the Father."
Because of this many of his disciples turned back,
and no longer went about with him.
So Jesus asked the twelve, "Do you also wish to go away?"
Simon Peter answered him,
"Lord, to whom can we go?
You have the words of eternal life.
We have come to believe and know
that you are the Holy One of God."

Concluding Prayer

Solemn Blessing (Ordinary Time VI)

May God bless us with every heavenly blessing,
make us always holy and pure in his sight,
pour out in abundance upon us the riches of his glory,
and teach us with the words of truth;
may he instruct us in the Gospel of salvation,
and ever endow us with fraternal charity.
Through Christ our Lord.

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 VI, Roman Missal p. 717)