

SUNDAY READINGS

READ AT HOME

Twenty-Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Year B

22 September 2024



Collect

O God, who founded all the commands of your sacred Law upon love of you and of our neighbour, grant that, by keeping your precepts, we may merit to attain eternal life.

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

Politicians and company directors alike are loath to be bearers of bad news. They're not keen to run the risk of losing power or profit. As a result, it can be almost impossible for ordinary folk to get access to crucial negative information. In the gospels the opposite is the case. There's a surplus of warning. Time and again Jesus makes plain what his own fate and that of his followers will be. It is the disciples who don't want to know.

The second thing that Jesus makes perfectly clear is that he never seeks out pain and suffering for its own sake, nor does he wish it on his followers. What he wants is just living. Today's reading from Wisdom, in alliance with the gospel, spells it out as the consequence of striving to live with honesty, integrity, compassion, mercy, sincerity and humility – or put more briefly, by love and truth. This is sure, ancient wisdom says, to arouse hostility from those whose ways are devious and self-serving. The treatment of whistle-blowers in contemporary society only serves to reinforce the lesson.

Peter put it this way in his first letter: "No one can hurt you if you are determined to do what is right; if you do have to suffer for doing good, you will count it a blessing. . . If it is the will of God that you should suffer, it is better to suffer for doing right than for doing wrong" (3:14, 17).

A reading from the book of Wisdom 2:12, 17–20

The godless say to themselves,
'Let us lie in wait for the virtuous man, since he annoys
us and opposes our way of life,
reproaches us for our breaches of the law
and accuses us of playing false to our upbringing.
Let us see if what he says is true,
let us observe what kind of end he himself will have.
If the virtuous man is God's son, God will take his
part and rescue him from the clutches of his enemies.
Let us test him with cruelty and with torture,
and thus explore this gentleness of his
and put his endurance to the proof.
Let us condemn him to a shameful death
since he will be looked after - we have his word for
it.'

First Reading

The choice of this passage from the book of Wisdom is clearly dictated by Jesus' second passion prediction in the gospel reading. There are clear parallels between the fate of the virtuous person and that of Jesus. Just as the godless mock the just by saying that God will rescue them, so the bystanders on Calvary deride Jesus (Mt 27:39-44; Mk 15:23-27). Strong connections like these make it difficult for Christians to appreciate this Old Testament text on its own merits.

It has multiple associations with other writings in the Hebrew scriptures. It brings to mind the treatment of Joseph by his brothers (Gen 37:18-20). More especially it has links to the fourth Servant Song in the prophet Isaiah (52:13-53:12) which details the suffering of God's faithful servant and assures him of ultimate vindication. Another close connection is with Psalm 21/22:6-8. The reference to the virtuous man as God's son is not unique. In the century or so before the birth of Jesus, Jewish writings commonly presented God as father.

In sum, this reading has a wealth of links to the scriptures both Old and New. It also displays insight into the psychology of those whose unjust ways are threatened with exposure by the example of people with integrity. Readers have the unusual task of voicing the thoughts of ruthless schemers. Once they have gained the assembly's attention, they should not shy away from making the plotters' malice plain.

Responsorial Psalm

Ps 53:3–6, 8

R. The Lord upholds my life.

○ God, save me by your name;
by your power, uphold my cause.
○ God, hear my prayer;
listen to the words of my mouth. **R.**

For proud men have risen against me,
ruthless men seek my life.
They have no regard for God. **R.**

But I have God for my help.
The Lord upholds my life.
I will sacrifice to you with willing heart
and praise your name for it is good. **R.**

Responsorial Psalm

After the dark scenario of the first reading, wholly given over to the wicked plotting of the downfall of the just, rays of light shine through the responsorial psalm. The setting of Psalm 53/54 is the same as the reading – a just person is being set upon by proud and ruthless people – but this time we hear the voice of the victim. The psalmist first pleads for God's assistance, then spells out the trouble he faces, before declaring his confidence in God and promising to offer sacrifice and praise. The response comes from the final stanza so it immediately sheds a reassuring light over the shadows of the first two stanzas.

Almost all of the original has been reproduced in the responsorial psalm, but what has been omitted is significant. The psalmist asks God to take vengeance on his foes and destroy them. Their downfall will be cause to give God praise. These avenging sentiments appear in a number of psalms, most especially in the conclusion to Psalm 136/137. By simply leaving them out, the lectionary spares us the difficult dilemma of how to pray these disturbing words.

Each stanza has its own sentiment. The psalm progresses through pleading and accusation to its confident conclusion. At times it is addressed to God, at others to all and sundry. Readers will need to adjust their tone of voice accordingly.

A reading from the first letter of St James

3:16 – 4:3

Wherever you find jealousy and ambition, you find disharmony, and wicked things of every kind being done; whereas the wisdom that comes down from above is essentially something pure; it also makes for peace, and is kindly and considerate; it is full of compassion and shows itself by doing good; nor is there any trace of partiality or hypocrisy in it.

Peacemakers, when they work for peace, sow the seeds which will bear fruit in holiness.

Where do these wars and battles between yourselves first start? Isn't it precisely in the desires fighting inside your own selves? You want something and you haven't got it; so you are prepared to kill. You have an ambition that you cannot satisfy; so you fight to get your way by force. Why you don't have what you want is because you don't pray for it; when you do pray and don't get it, it is because you have not prayed properly, you have prayed for something to indulge your own desires.

A reading from the holy Gospel according to Mark

9:30–37

After leaving the mountain Jesus and his disciples made their way through Galilee; and he did not want anyone to know, because he was instructing his disciples; he was telling them, 'The Son of Man will be delivered into the hands of men; they will put him to death; and three days after he has been put to death he will rise again.' But they did not understand what he said and were afraid to ask him.

They came to Capernaum, and when he was in the house he asked them, 'What were you arguing about on the road?' They said nothing because they had been arguing which of them was the greatest. So he sat down, called the Twelve to him and said, 'If anyone wants to be first, he must make himself last of all and servant of all.' He then took a little child, set him in front of them, put his arms round him, and said to them, 'Anyone who welcomes one of these little children in my name, welcomes me; and anyone who welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.'

Second Reading

Much of the content and spirit of the letter of James qualify it for inclusion in the Old rather than the New Testament. It would be at home among the wisdom books of the Hebrew scriptures. Today the author contrasts earthly wisdom and its bitter fruits with "the wisdom that comes down from above." To demonstrate the perfection of this wisdom, he names seven attributes. It is pure, peaceful, kindly, considerate, compassionate, good, impartial and sincere. While this may seem a comprehensive list, it's no match for the elaborate catalogue in Wisdom 7:22-8:1.

What gives rise to bitter division in the community is conflicting desires within each person's heart. With a measure of poetic license, the author claims that these lead to murder and violence. The problem, he says, is that people are praying for the fulfilment of their own wayward desires rather than in accordance with heavenly wisdom.

As the text appears in the lectionary, the author frames his praise of wisdom with warnings about its opposite – a short one to start with, then a longer one. As they proceed with their proclamation, readers will need to change their tone from admonition to admiration and back to admonition.

Gospel

The lectionary modifies the opening phrase of today's gospel. It specifies the place from which Jesus and his disciples leave as "the mountain." This creates a link with the story of Jesus' transfiguration and its aftermath (8:36–9:29), all of which is omitted in the lectionary. Instead, it moves directly to Jesus' second prediction of his passion. In all three such passages Jesus refers to himself as the Son of Man, a title which paradoxically links frail humanity (the Servant Songs in Isaiah) with heavenly power and glory (Dan 7:13-14).

Mark does not spare the disciples. Not only do they resist asking about the implications of Jesus' suffering and death, they actively seek the advancement of their personal ambitions. Jesus counters this pursuit of a high place in the social hierarchy. His followers are to choose the place of the servant, the one with the lowest, not the highest, status. This role is immediately supplemented by that of the child. Jesus doesn't teach here that they must become like little children, as he does in Mt 18:3, but the effect is similar. Welcoming a child is not an act of power but one of humility.

This reading is a compelling combination of action, dialogue and instruction. It lends itself to authoritative proclamation.

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-FIFTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

FIRST READING (NRSV)

A reading from the book of Wisdom 2:12, 17–20

The godless say.

"Let us lie in wait for the righteous one,
who makes life inconvenient to us and opposes our actions;
who reproaches us for sins against the law,
and accuses us of sins against our training.

"Let us see if his words are true,
and let us test what will happen at the end of his life;
for if the righteous one is God's child, God will help him,
and will deliver him from the hand of his adversaries.

"Let us test him with insult and torture,
so that we may find out how gentle he is,
and make trial of his forbearance.
Let us condemn him to a shameful death,
for; according to what he says, he will be protected."

SECOND READING (NRSV)

A reading from the letter of James 3:16 – 4:3

Where there is envy and selfish ambition,
there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind.

But the wisdom from above is first pure,
then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield,
full of mercy and good fruits,
without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy.

And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace
for those who make peace.

Those conflicts and disputes among you, where do they come from?
Do they not come from your cravings that are at war within you?
You want something and do not have it;
so you commit murder.

And you covet something and cannot obtain it;
so you engage in disputes and conflicts.

You do not have, because you do not ask.
You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly,
in order to spend what you get on your pleasures.

GOSPEL (NRSV)

A reading from the holy gospel according to Mark 9:30–37

After leaving the mountain

Jesus and his disciples went on from there
and passed through Galilee.

He did not want anyone to know it;
for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them,
"The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands,
and they will kill him,
and three days after being killed, he will rise again."
But they did not understand what he was saying
and were afraid to ask him.

Then they came to Capernaum;
and when he was in the house Jesus asked them,
"What were you arguing about on the way?"
But they were silent,
for on the way they had argued with one another
who was the greatest.
Jesus sat down, called the twelve, and said to them,
"Whoever wants to be first
must be last of all and servant of all."
Then he took a little child and put it among them;
and taking it in his arms, he said to them,
"Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me,
and whoever welcomes me
welcomes not me but the one who sent me."

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.

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)