

SUNDAY READINGS

READ AT HOME

Twenty-Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Year B

29 September 2024



Collect

O God, who manifest your almighty power
above all by pardoning and showing mercy,
bestow, we pray, your grace abundantly upon us
and make those hastening to attain your promises
heirs to the treasures of heaven.

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

The preparation of the 2020-2021 Plenary Council in Australia was guided by the exhortation “Listen to what is the Spirit saying . . .”. With the meetings of Council receding into the past, but with so much work ahead, we are encouraged by both Moses and Jesus today to welcome the gift of the Spirit. And so we keep praying the Plenary Council Prayer:

Come, Holy Spirit of Pentecost.

Come, Holy Spirit of the great South Land.

O God, bless and unite all your people in Australia
and guide us on the pilgrim way of the Plenary Council.

Give us the grace to see your face in one another
and to recognise Jesus, our companion on the road.

Give us the courage to tell our stories
and to speak boldly of your truth.

Give us ears to listen humbly to each other
and a discerning heart to hear what you are saying.

Lead your Church into a hope-filled future,
that we may live the joy of the Gospel.

Through Jesus Christ our Lord,
bread for the journey from age to age. Amen.

Our Lady Help of Christians, pray for us.

St Mary of the Cross MacKillop, pray for us.

A reading from the book of Numbers 11:25–29

The Lord came down in the Cloud. He spoke with Moses, but took some of the spirit that was on him and put it on the seventy elders. When the spirit came on them they prophesied, but not again.

Two men had stayed back in the camp; one was called Eldad and the other Medad. The spirit came down on them; though they had not gone to the Tent, their names were enrolled among the rest. These began to prophesy in the camp. The young man ran to tell this to Moses, 'Look,' he said 'Eldad and Medad are prophesying in the camp.' Then said Joshua the son of Nun, who had served Moses from his youth, 'My Lord Moses, stop them!' Moses answered him, 'Are you jealous on my account? If only the whole people of the Lord were prophets, and the Lord gave his Spirit to them all!'

First Reading

The reading from Numbers appears to be entirely benign, but it's worth reading the earlier part of chapter 11 to see that all is not quite what it seems. On their way through the desert, the people complain again. They are unsatisfied with the manna and want meat to eat. So demanding are they that Moses is reduced to misery and wants to die (11:15). To share the burden of leadership, he is given seventy elders (as in Canaan governance structures) who receive a one-off endowment of his own God-given spirit.

More or less as an aside, the author mentions two of the elders who did not come out of the camp to the Tent of Meeting. They too are seized by the spirit of prophecy. In an admirable display of magnanimity, Moses exclaims how good it would be if the entire people shared in this spirit. Such an egalitarian sentiment, it has been suggested, is not typical of Deuteronomy but more in keeping with the prophets after the exile.

This passage has been chosen, as will be seen, to connect with the opening verses of today's gospel. It is a short but eventful story, punctuated by strongly voiced interventions from Joshua and Moses. Readers are sure to proclaim it readily with lively energy.

Responsorial Psalm Ps 18:8, 10, 12–14

R. The precepts of the Lord give joy to the heart.

The law of the Lord is perfect,
it revives the soul.

The rule of the Lord is to be trusted,
it gives wisdom to the simple. **R.**

The fear of the Lord is holy,
abiding for ever.

The decrees of the Lord are truth
and all of them just. **R.**

So in them your servant finds instruction;
great reward is in their keeping.

But who can detect all his errors?
From hidden faults acquit me. **R.**

From presumption restrain your servant
and let it not rule me.

Then shall I be blameless,
clean from grave sin. **R.**

Responsorial Psalm

Psalm 18/19 is something of a hybrid. It begins by extolling God's glory revealed in creation, moves to praise of God's wisdom embodied in the Law, and finishes with a plea for forgiveness and acceptance. The four verses of the responsorial psalm, on the Law, are sampled from the second half.

It might seem strange that a reading extolling the free inspiration of the spirit is followed by one that exalts the Law. The two should be seen as complementary rather than contradictory. One has only to see the qualities that are attributed to the Law. It revives the soul, imparts wisdom, embodies truth and justice, and cleanses from sin. For the ancient Israelite, the Law was the Torah, the living, life-giving word of God. It was not a burdensome imposition but a gift that bestowed identity, wise guidance and covenant protection. In other words, it was permeated by the spirit of God.

The response is taken from one of the verses that isn't used in the responsorial psalm. The stanzas are succinct and most of the lines short, so readers will need to lead the psalm thoughtfully, giving the congregation time to hear and absorb each phrase.

A reading from the letter of St James 5:1–6

An answer for the rich. Start crying, weep for the miseries that are coming to you. Your wealth is all rotting, your clothes are all eaten up by moths. All your gold and your silver are corroding away, and the same corrosion will be your own sentence, and eat into your body. It was a burning fire that you stored up as your treasure for the last days. Labourers mowed your fields, and you cheated them - listen to the wages that you kept back, calling out; realise that the cries of the reapers have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts. On earth you have had a life of comfort and luxury; in the time of slaughter you went on eating to your heart's content. It was you who condemned the innocent and killed them; they offered you no resistance.

A reading from the holy Gospel according to Mark 9:38–43, 45, 47–48

John said to Jesus, 'Master, we saw a man who is not one of us casting out devils in your name; and because he was not one of us we tried to stop him.' But Jesus said, 'You must not stop him: no one who works a miracle in my name is likely to speak evil of me. Anyone who is not against us is for us.'

'If anyone gives you a cup of water to drink just because you belong to Christ, then I tell you solemnly, he will most certainly not lose his reward.'

'But anyone who is an obstacle to bring down one of these little ones who have faith, would be better thrown into the sea with a great millstone round his neck. And if your hand should cause you to sin, cut it off; it is better for you to enter into life crippled, than to have two hands and go to hell, into the fire that cannot be put out. And if your foot should cause you to sin, cut it off; it is better for you to enter into life lame, than to have two feet and be thrown into hell. And if your eye should cause you to sin, tear it out; it is better for you to enter into the kingdom of God with one eye, than to have two eyes and be thrown into hell where their worm does not die nor their fire go out.'

Second Reading

This final excerpt from the letter of James finds the author in full rhetorical flight. He rails against injustice like the prophets of old, such as Amos (8:4-8) and Ezekiel (22:29). They also prophesy doom for the rich and powerful (Am 3:9-12). Indeed, it's not only the prophets who issue such warnings. Jesus does too (Mt 6:19; Lk 12:33-34), not least in the parable of the rich man and Lazarus (Lk 16:19-31).

Once again, we hear a passage that could have been entirely from the Old Testament. One of the examples the author gives is that of employers holding back wages. They would have been refusing to pay insecure day labourers their wage until the next day, a practice explicitly forbidden in the Law (Lev 19:13; Dt 24:15). Without much hyperbole, the author accuses them of killing the innocent or just one. This may or may not be an allusion to Jesus or even to James himself (labelled James the Just). More probably it refers generally to the poor and oppressed.

The reading is like a volley of fire. Each accusation follows hot on the heels of another. While not overdramatising the diatribe, nor speeding through it, readers should make its sting felt.

Gospel

In comparison with the gospels for the last several Sundays, all of which were quite neatly constructed, today's is a loosely connected string of sayings. The first one is linked to the end of last Sunday's reading by the phrase "in my name." Here it refers to the welcome not of little children but of exorcists who cast out devils in Jesus' name. Like Moses in the first reading, Jesus is inclusive on this score, though he says the contrary elsewhere (Mt 12:30), perhaps in very different circumstances.

Another verbal link is forged by the phrase "because you belong to Christ." This time Jesus commends those who offer a cup of water to a thirsty follower of his.

This next link connects back a bit further to those who are least in the kingdom, like little children. In reporting Jesus' words here, Mark may understand him to mean the "little ones" who were the simple, poor and devout. In that case the offence that the sinner commits is one of such scandal that it destroys their faith. It must therefore be matched by drastic action. Whatever organ the sinner has used to cause this harm must be got rid of.

Whether, as is stated in the footnotes to the NRSV Bible, Jesus is using euphemisms to refer to sexual sins against little children is a matter of interpretation. Either way, the remedy is extreme. Mention of "hell" does not carry its modern connotation; it refers to the Valley of Hinnon south-west of Jerusalem, a place that became symbolic of the destruction of evil.

The text falls clearly into three parts, the first two short and upbeat, the third dark and dire. Ministers of the word will need to adjust their tone accordingly.

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-SIXTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

FIRST READING (NRSV)

A reading from the book of Numbers

11:25–29

The Lord said to Moses,
"Gather for me seventy of the elders of the people,
and they shall bear the burden of the people along with you
so that you do not bear it all by yourself."
Then the Lord came down in the cloud,
took some of the spirit that was on Moses
and put it on the seventy elders.
When the spirit rested upon them, they prophesied.
But they did not do so again.
Two men remained in the camp,
one named Eldad, and the other named Medad,
and the spirit rested on them;
they were among those registered,
but they had not gone out to the tent,
and so they prophesied in the camp.
A young man ran and told Moses,
"Eldad and Medad are prophesying in the camp."
Joshua son of Nun,
the assistant of Moses, one of his chosen men, said,
"My lord Moses, stop them!"
But Moses said to him, "Are you jealous for my sake?
Would that all the Lord's people were prophets,
and that the Lord would put his spirit on them!"

SECOND READING (NRSV)

A reading from the letter of James

5:1–6

Come now, you rich people,
weep and wail for the miseries that are coming to you.
Your riches have rotted, and your clothes are moth-eaten.
Your gold and silver have rusted,
and their rust will be evidence against you,
and it will eat your flesh like fire.
You have laid up treasure for the last days.
Listen!
The wages of the labourers who mowed your fields,
which you kept back by fraud, cry out,
and the cries of the harvesters
have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts.
You have lived on the earth in luxury and in pleasure;
you have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter.
You have condemned and murdered the righteous one,
who does not resist you.

GOSPEL (NRSV)

A reading from the holy gospel according to Mark 9:38–43, 45, 47–48

After Jesus had finished teaching the disciples,
John said to him,
"Teacher; we saw someone casting out demons in your name,
and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us."
But Jesus said, "Do not stop him;
for no one who does a deed of power in my name
will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me.
Whoever is not against us is for us.
"For truly I tell you,
whoever gives you a cup of water to drink
because you bear the name of Christ
will by no means lose the reward.
"If any of you put a stumbling block
before one of these little ones who believe in me,
it would be better for you
if a great millstone were hung around your neck
and you were thrown into the sea.
"If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off;
it is better for you to enter life maimed
than to have two hands and to go to hell,
to the unquenchable fire.
And if your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off;
it is better for you to enter life lame
than to have two feet and to be thrown into hell.
And if your eye causes you to stumble, tear it out;
it is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye
than to have two eyes and to be thrown into hell,
where their worm never dies, and the fire is never quenched."

Concluding Prayer

Solemn Blessing (Ordinary Time V)

May almighty God always keep every adversity far from us
and in his kindness pour out upon us the gifts of his blessing.
Amen.

May God keep our hearts attentive to his words,
that they may be filled with everlasting gladness.
Amen.

And so, may we always understand what is good and right,
and be found ever hastening along
in the path of God's commands,
made coheirs with the citizens of heaven.
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 V, Roman Missal p. 716)