

SUNDAY READINGS

READ AT HOME

Twenty-Ninth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Year B

20 October 2024



Collect

Almighty ever-living God,
grant that we may always conform our will to yours
and serve your majesty in sincerity of heart.
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

Jesus does some straight-talking to the ambitious sons of Zebedee, then says that whoever wants to be first must be slave to all. Paul the apostle said, “Be ambitious for the higher gifts” (1 Cor 12:31). Here are some related words from Dorothy Day, social activist, pacifist and dogged Catholic:

“Today we are not content with little things, with small beginnings. We should look to St Teresa, the Little Flower, to walk her little way of love. We should look to St Teresa of Avila, who was not content to be like those people who proceeded with the pace of hers about God’s business, but like those people who on their own account were greatly daring in what they wished to do for God.

“Do what comes to hand. Whatsoever thy hand finds to do, do it with all thy might. After all, God is with us. . . We offer Him what we are going to do. If He wishes it to prosper, it will. We must depend solely on Him. Work as though everything depended on ourselves, and pray as though everything depended on God, as St Ignatius says” (cited in Robert Ellsberg, ed. *By Little and By Little: The Selected Writings of Dorothy Day*. Melbourne: Dove Communications, 1983, 64).

A reading from the prophet Isaiah 53:10–11

The Lord has been pleased to crush his servant with suffering.

If he offers his life in atonement,
he shall see his heirs, he shall have a long life
and through him what the Lord wishes will be done.

His soul's anguish over
he shall see the light and be content.
By his sufferings shall my servant justify many,
taking their faults on himself.

First Reading

The solemn reading of the entire fourth song of the suffering servant (Is 52:13–53:12) on Good Friday afternoon is powerfully moving. There are so many striking parallels with Jesus' passion and death. It is a sombre moment in the liturgies of the paschal triduum. Today we have a fragment from that song, just two verses from the final section. The choice of this affect-laden text has been inspired by Jesus' saying in the gospel that the Son of Man came "to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many."

The passage begins with the disconcerting statement, "The Lord has been pleased to crush his servant with suffering." These jarring words make sense if they are understood to mean that the servant's suffering is in accord with God's loving saving purpose. They do not mean that God demands, much less takes pleasure in, the servant's pain. The rest is plainly positive. The servant shall have a long life, see his heirs, see the light and be content. Crucially, his willingness to suffer for the faults of others will "justify many." This appears to be the only example in the entire Old Testament of such surrogate suffering. The prophet does not venture to explain how the servant's obedience achieves this salvation.

As has been noted from time to time, short and somewhat puzzling texts like these pose difficulties for the assembly. Readers will help their listeners by making sure they have everyone's attention before embarking on the proclamation and then proceeding with Good Friday gravity.

Responsorial Psalm Ps 32:4–5, 18–20, 22

R. Lord, let your mercy be on us,
as we place our trust in you.

The word of the Lord is faithful
and all his works to be trusted.
The Lord loves justice and right
and fills the earth with his love. **R.**

The Lord looks on those who revere him,
on those who hope in his love,
to rescue their souls from death,
to keep them alive in famine. **R.**

Our soul is waiting for the Lord.
The Lord is our help and our shield.
May your love be upon us, O Lord,
as we place all our hope in you. **R.**

Responsorial Psalm

Psalm 32/33 is an expansive hymn of praise for the God who has created all things and who guides the course of human history. Different sections of the psalm have been extracted and re-united to form the responsorial psalm. The very last sentence of the psalm serves as the response. It invokes the Lord's "mercy," also rendered as "love" or "steadfast love." For the psalmist, and for Israel, this is the fundamental divine trait that elicits complete trust.

The psalm has been composed as a communal prayer. In a sense it generalises the faith of the servant of the Lord and extends it to the whole people. As promised, they are blessed by his willingness to trust God's word, to revere God, and to put all his hope in God's love. They have made his stance their own.

The entire psalm is pervaded by a spirit of confident and thankful faith. Seen in connection with the first reading, the response appears as a plea for help, but in relation to the psalm it is a serene expression of trust and should be proclaimed as such. As always with a two-part response, readers will need to convey with their tone of voice and a pause that there is a second line to follow the first.

A reading from the letter to the Hebrews 4:4–16

Since in Jesus, the Son of God, we have the supreme high priest who has gone through to the highest heaven, we must never let go of the faith that we have professed. For it is not as if we had a high priest who was incapable of feeling our weaknesses with us; but we have one who has been tempted in every way that we are, though he is without sin. Let us be confident, then, in approaching the throne of grace, that we shall have mercy from him and find grace when we are in need of help.

A reading from the holy Gospel according to Mark

10:35–45

[James and John, the sons of Zebedee, approached Jesus. 'Master,' they said to him 'we want you to do us a favour.' He said to them, 'What is it you want me to do for you?' They said to him, 'Allow us to sit one at your right hand and the other at your left in your glory.' 'You do not know what you are asking' Jesus said to them. 'Can you drink the cup that I must drink, or be baptised with the baptism with which I must be baptised?' They replied, 'We can.' Jesus said to them, 'The cup that I must drink you shall drink, and with the baptism with which I must be baptised you shall be baptised, but as for seats at my right hand or my left, these are not mine to grant; they belong to those to whom they have been allotted.'

When the other ten heard this they began to feel indignant with James and John, so] Jesus called them to him and said to them, 'You know that among the pagans their so-called rulers lord it over them, and their great men make their authority felt. This is not to happen among you. No; anyone who wants to become great among you must be your servant, and anyone who wants to be first among you must be slave to all. For the Son of Man himself did not come to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.'

[Short Form: omit text in brackets.]

Second Reading

Today's reading is the second of three from Hebrews that follow immediately on from each other. This and next week's text serve as an introduction to the central body of the work that's devoted to the priesthood of Jesus Christ (5:11–10:18). The uniqueness of Christ is spelt out plainly. He is the "supreme high priest" because he is both Son of God and so completely like us as to have "been tempted in every way that we are."

The nature of those temptations is not spelt out. They bring to mind the story of Jesus' testing by the devil in the desert and also on Calvary by the passers-by, chief priests and scribes (Mk 15:29-32). The difference here is that the author links Jesus' temptations with our human condition in a way that the gospel writers do not. He swiftly adds that though tempted Jesus did not sin.

It is as his divine-human priestly self that Jesus has entered the heavenly realm and taken his place on the throne of grace. From there he dispenses mercy. This is close to the heart of the whole exhortation. Through Christ we have access to the heavens and to mercy, unlike the Israelites of old who depended on the high priest entering the Holy of Holies once a year on the Day of Atonement. The author is keen for his readership to hold fast to the faith and stay confident.

The message of this reading is of great importance for believers of all generations. Readers who communicate its significance with clarity and credibility will serve the assembly well.

Gospel

The lectionary omits the third passion prediction, perhaps on the basis that having the first two in quick succession (on the 24th and 25th Sundays) was enough. It offers the option of a shorter gospel today which seems strange, given that all the other readings are short, the longer gospel isn't really long, and the key to the shorter text is the exchange between Jesus and the sons of Zebedee. It would seem desirable to opt for the fuller version.

James and John's request for power and glory, coming so soon after Jesus' insistence on becoming "last of all and servant of all" (25th Sunday), is strikingly presumptuous. Nonetheless Jesus does not rebuke them. Instead, he warns them of the requirement that they drink his cup and be baptised with his baptism, metaphors for the suffering he will endure as he carries out his Father's saving plan. His statement that he had no power to grant them thrones of glory seems surprising. Perhaps this is the consequence of his radical assumption of humanity, alluded to in the reading from Hebrews and spelt out explicitly in Phil 2:6-11.

It is only here (and in the corresponding verse in Matthew) that Jesus speaks of his death in terms of ransom, but the idea has already been hinted at in the servant song and is taken up by other New Testament writers. Perhaps the key thought to focus on is what Jesus' death made possible – the freedom to live as Jesus lived. Medieval theories of satisfaction are something else altogether.

In sum, this reading calls disciples to a life of self-sacrifice in fulfilment of God's loving purposes and in the service of others. An assured proclamation of the text will make this crystal clear.

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-NINTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

FIRST READING (NRSV)

A reading from the book of the prophet Isaiah 53:10–11

The servant of the Lord has borne our infirmities
and carried our diseases;
yet we accounted him stricken,
struck down by God, and afflicted.

It was the will of the Lord to crush him with pain.
When you make his life an offering for sin,
he shall see his offspring, and shall prolong his days;
through him the will of the Lord shall prosper.
Out of his anguish he shall see light;
he shall find satisfaction through his knowledge.
The righteous one, my servant,
shall make many righteous,
and he shall bear their iniquities.

SECOND READING (NRSV)

A reading from the letter to the Hebrews 4:14–16

Since we have a great high priest
who has passed through the heavens,
Jesus, the Son of God,
let us hold fast to our confession.
For we do not have a high priest
who is unable to sympathise with our weaknesses,
but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are,
yet without sin.

Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness,
so that we may receive mercy
and find grace to help in time of need.

GOSPEL (NRSV)

A reading from the holy gospel according to Mark 10:35–45

[James and John, the sons of Zebedee,
came forward to Jesus and said to him,
"Teacher; we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you."
And Jesus said to them,
"What is it you want me to do for you?"
And they said to him,
"Grant us to sit, one at your right hand
and one at your left, in your glory."
But Jesus said to them,
"You do not know what you are asking.
Are you able to drink the cup that I drink,
or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?"
They replied, "We are able."

Then Jesus said to them,
"The cup that I drink you will drink;
and with the baptism with which I am baptized,
you will be baptized;
but to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant,
but it is for those for whom it has been prepared."

"When the ten heard this,
they began to be angry with James and John.]

So Jesus called them and said to them,
"You know that among the Gentiles
those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them,
and their great ones are tyrants over them.
But it is not so among you;
whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant,
and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all.
For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve,
and to give his life as a ransom for many.

[Short Form: omit text in brackets.]

Concluding Prayer

Solemn Blessing (Ordinary Time II)

May the peace of God,
which surpasses all understanding,
keep our hearts and minds
in the knowledge and love of God,
and of his Son, our Lord Jesus Christ.

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 II, Roman Missal p. 715)