

SUNDAY READINGS

READ AT HOME

Thirty-Second Sunday in Ordinary Time

Year B

10 November 2024



Collect

Almighty and merciful God,
graciously keep from us all adversity,
so that, unhindered in mind and body alike,
we may pursue in freedom of heart
the things that are yours.
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

Last Sunday we heard part of the Shema, the essential and enduring Jewish confession of faith. Today we hear Jesus' scathing criticism of the scribes. This is but one of many hostile exchanges between Jesus and the Jewish authorities. In view of these contrasting texts, it's worth remembering how much the Christian faith draws on its Jewish heritage. In 2023, the Australian Catholic Bishops issued a statement called *Walking Together: Catholics with Jews in the Australian Context*. Here's a tiny sample:

"Our bonds are radically biblical, grounded in the Torah. These attitudes shape Christian listening to the Holy Spirit's presence in the world. This listening is important as Christians turn to their scriptures mindful of the Jewish people, the first to hear the Word of God.

"We receive the First Testament from First Century Judaism. Even the books which are not included in the Jewish Bible come from a Jewish and Jewish-Greek context. We know too that many New Testament texts come from the context of Judaism within the Greco-Roman world. Christians and Jews consider the Scriptures they share as God's revealed word. These shared Scriptures can nourish and form us as God's people. Both Christians and Jews have their own tradition of interpretation and application. But we can learn much from each other's traditions" (p. 3).

A reading from the first book of Kings 17:10–16

Elijah the Prophet went off to Sidon. And when he reached the city gate, there was a widow gathering sticks; addressing her he said, 'Please bring a little water in a vessel for me to drink.' She was setting off to bring it when he called after her. 'Please' he said 'bring me a scrap of bread in your hand.' 'As the Lord your God lives,' she replied 'I have no baked bread, but only a handful of meal in a jar and a little oil in a jug; I am just gathering a stick or two to go and prepare this for myself and my son to eat, and then we shall die.' But Elijah said to her, 'Do not be afraid, go and do as you have said; but first make a little scone of it for me and bring it to me, and then make some for yourself and for your son. For thus the Lord speaks, the God of Israel:

"Jar of meal shall not be spent,
jug of oil shall not be emptied,
before the day when the Lord sends
rain on the face of the earth."

The woman went and did as Elijah told her and they ate the food, she, himself and her son. The jar of meal was not spent nor the jug of oil emptied, just as the Lord had foretold through Elijah.

Responsorial Psalm

Ps 145:7–10

R. Praise the Lord, my soul!

or

R. Alleluia.

It is the Lord who keeps faith for ever,
who is just to those who are oppressed.
It is he who gives bread to the hungry,
the Lord, who sets prisoners free. R.

It is the Lord who gives sight to the blind,
who raises up those who are bowed down.

It is the Lord who loves the just,
the Lord, who protects the stranger. R.

The Lord upholds the widow and orphan
but thwarts the path of the wicked.

The Lord will reign for ever,
Zion's God, from age to age. R.

First Reading

The trusting faith of a poor widow is at the heart of both the first reading and the gospel. Neither, however, is named. In each case it's the male protagonist who dominates the story - Elijah in the first case and Jesus in the second.

The prophet Elijah's mission in the northern kingdom of the 9th century BC was to uphold the worship of the God of Israel. The last six chapters of 1 Kings and the first of 2 Kings are devoted to Elijah's dramatic exploits in defence of the Lord. The Elijah cycle glorifies both the prophet and the Lord over against the Phoenician god Baal, whose cult had been introduced by King Ahab and his wife Jezebel. They became Elijah's mortal enemies.

Today's story is set in the heartland of Baal worship. Elijah is in enemy territory. He is vulnerable and in need of God's protection, though the widow's plight is far more dire. She and her son are at the point of death. Though presumably not a believer in Elijah's God, she takes him at his word, shares her food, and is miraculously blessed.

It's a colourful tale, with plenty of human appeal as well as impressive heavenly providence. Jesus cites it when he faces opposition in his hometown synagogue (Lk 4:26). Readers proclaiming this text have every opportunity to employ their story-telling skills.

Responsorial Psalm

Psalm 145/146 is the first of a group of psalms that bring the whole Book of Psalms to a close on a sustained note of praise. The short response for today, taken from the beginning of the psalm, establishes this tone immediately. The psalmist proceeds to celebrate God's faithful goodness, listing the various kinds of vulnerable and needy people whom God comes to the help of.

Many of these affirmations have parallels in other psalms, so Psalm 145/146 can be seen as a resumé of some of the positive themes of the whole psalter. The catalogue of God's actions on behalf of the defenceless forges a direct link with the story of the widow and Elijah. It also serves as another connection with the episode of Jesus' manifesto in the synagogue at Nazareth (Lk 4:16-30). On that occasion, quoting Isaiah, Jesus announces that his mission is to the poor, the captives, the blind and the downtrodden. This psalm is upbeat in tone from beginning to end. Readers should enter easily into its spirit of glad acknowledgement.

A reading from the letter to the Hebrews 9:24–28

It is not as though Christ had entered a man-made sanctuary which was only modelled on the real one; but it was heaven itself, so that he could appear in the actual presence of God on our behalf. And he does not have to offer himself again and again, like the high priest going into the sanctuary year after year with the blood that is not his own, or else he would have had to suffer over and over again since the world began. Instead of that, he has made his appearance once and for all, now at the end of the last age, to do away with sin by sacrificing himself. Since men only die once, and after that comes judgement, so Christ, too, offers himself only once to take the faults of many on himself, and when he appears a second time, it will not be to deal with sin but to reward with salvation those who are waiting for him.

A reading from the holy Gospel according to Mark

12:38–44

[In his teaching Jesus said, 'Beware of the scribes who like to walk about in long robes, to be greeted obsequiously in the market squares, to take the front seats in the synagogues and the places of honour at banquets; these are the men who swallow the property of widows, while making a show of lengthy prayers. The more severe will be the sentence they receive.']

He sat down opposite the treasury and watched the people putting money into the treasury, and many of the rich put in a great deal. A poor widow came and put in two small coins, the equivalent of a penny. Then he called his disciples and said to them, 'I tell you solemnly, this poor widow has put more in than all who have contributed to the treasury; for they have all put in money they had over, but she from the little she had has put in everything she possessed, all she had to live on.'

[Short Form: omit text in brackets.]

Second Reading

Today's reading from Hebrews is unlikely to be readily understood by the faithful at large. To decode it fully one needs to have some grasp of both Platonic philosophy and ancient Jewish worship traditions.

Platonic philosophy lies behind the contrast between the earthly sanctuary (the Holy of Holies in the Temple) and the heavenly sanctuary (the realm of God's presence). Along with this spatial dimension there's a temporal one. The high priests of old had to perform an annual blood ritual on the Day of Atonement (along with a range of other sacrifices) to atone for their own and others' sin. By contrast, Christ's single self-sacrifice has done away with sin once and for all; it is eternally present in the sight of God. The author writes of this self-sacrifice in the light of the fourth song of the suffering servant in Isaiah: "he was bearing the faults of many and praying all the while for sinners" (53:12).

Jewish thought comes to the fore again in the expectation of Christ's return. History has a destination. Christ's second appearing will not be an occasion of judgement – sin has already been dealt with – but of the granting of salvation.

A simple message may be distilled from this complexity: Christ has atoned for sin once and for all. To give the assembly a chance to grasp this saving truth, readers will need to gain the best understanding of the author's argument as possible, rehearse the proclamation out loud a number of times (preferably before a listener or two), and deliver it with clarity and at a considered pace.

Gospel

Mark completes his account of Jesus' public ministry with this brief two-act drama. There seems no compelling reason for not proclaiming the full, rather than the abbreviated, text. All that lies between this episode and the passion narrative is Jesus' discourse on the end times. This makes Jesus' critique of the religious authorities all the more pungent. The fact that he is about to suffer at their hands and give nothing less than his life sets the scribes' corruption in high relief. Impressive robes, public religiosity and private venality are worlds apart from a body stripped and nailed to a cross.

Jesus' words about the widow's gift to the treasury appear to commend her extraordinary generosity. He could be holding her up as an exemplar of those faithful Israelites who were nothing in the eyes of the world but invaluable in God's eyes. They had no power or wealth but gave their hearts to God. That seems to have been the conventional interpretation. Another view is that Jesus is in effect continuing his diatribe against the authorities and lamenting how they have exploited this widow to the extreme.

What is certain is that Jesus is about to be betrayed, abandoned, made to suffer and to die. If the widow is a victim of the establishment, so too is Jesus. The language in this reading is forthright. It should be delivered as such.

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.

THIRTY-SECOND SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

FIRST READING (NRSV)

A reading from the first book of Kings **17:10–16**

Elijah, the prophet, set out and went to Zarephath.
When he came to the gate of the town,
a widow was there gathering sticks;
he called to her and said,
"Bring me a little water in a vessel, so that I may drink."
As she was going to bring it, he called to her and said,
"Bring me a morsel of bread in your hand."
But she said, "As the Lord your God lives,
I have nothing baked, only a handful of meal in ajar;
and a little oil in a jug;
I am now gathering a couple of sticks,
so that I may go home and prepare it for myself and my son,
that we may eat it, and die."
Elijah said to her;
"Do not be afraid;
go and do as you have said;
but first make me a little cake of it and bring it to me,
and afterwards make something for yourself and your son.
For thus says the Lord the God of Israel:
'The jar of meal will not be emptied
and the jug of oil will not fail
until the day that the Lord sends rain on the earth.'"
She went and did as Elijah said,
so that she as well as he and her household ate for many days.
The jar of meal was not emptied,
neither did the jug of oil fail,
according to the word of the Lord that he spoke by Elijah.

SECOND READING (NRSV)

A reading from the letter to the Hebrews **9:24–28**

Christ did not enter a sanctuary made by human hands,
a mere copy of the true one,
but he entered into heaven itself,
now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf.
Nor was it to offer himself again and again,
as the high priest enters the Holy Place year after year
with blood that is not his own;
for then he would have had to suffer again and again
since the foundation of the world.
But as it is, Christ has appeared once for all at the end of the age
to remove sin by the sacrifice of himself.
And just as it is appointed for mortals to die once,
and after that comes the judgment,
so Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many,
will appear a second time,
not to deal with sin,
but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him.

GOSPEL (NRSV)

A reading from the holy gospel according to Mark 12:38–44

[Jesus was teaching in the temple,
and a large crowd was listening to him.

He said,

"Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes,
and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces,
and to have the best seats in the synagogues
and places of honour at banquets!

They devour widows' houses

and for the sake of appearance say long prayers.

They will receive the greater condemnation."]

Jesus sat down opposite the treasury,

and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury.

Many rich people put in large sums.

A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins,
which are worth a penny.

Then he called his disciples and said to them,

"Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more
than all those who are contributing to the treasury.

For all of them have contributed out of their abundance;
but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had,
all she had to live on."

[Short Form: omit text in brackets.]

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)