

SUNDAY READINGS

READ AT HOME

15th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Year A

12 July 2020



Collect

O God, who show the light of your truth
to those who go astray,
so that they may return to the right path,
give all who for the faith they profess
are accounted Christians
the grace to reject whatever is contrary to the name of Christ
and to strive after all that does it honour.
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

Those looking in the scriptures for a clear exposition of doctrine or a systematic moral code are doomed to be disappointed. Such an enterprise is bound to be continually subverted by the variety of traditions, points of view, and forms of literature in the Bible.

Subversion in fact is the name of the game when Jesus teaches in parables. These are short stories whose aim is to surprise. They appear to be a favourite teaching tool of Jesus. He engages his listeners' attention with a story that is generally about familiar things such as farming practice or managing a household. But there is a twist along the way, usually at the end. Jesus uses this unexpected turn to undermine his hearers' conventional views about "the way things are". They are meant to provoke insight into another reality – the kingdom of heaven.

Today we begin a series of three readings from the Parable Sermon in Matthew's gospel. First we are reminded by the prophet Isaiah of the sure power of God's word to effect its purpose. Then Paul invites us to accept that we are caught up in an unfinished process of cosmic rebirth, but we and the whole of creation will ultimately be set free.

A reading from the book of Isaiah 55:10–11

Thus says the Lord: 'As the rain and the snow come down from the heavens and do not return without watering the earth, making it yield and giving growth to provide seed for the sower and bread for the eating, so the word that goes from my mouth does not return to me empty, without carrying out my will and succeeding in what it was sent to do.'

First Reading

Today's short passage from the prophet Isaiah is the conclusion to a text read in full at the Easter Vigil. The fifth reading for that holy night is Isaiah 55:1–11; today we content ourselves with verses ten and eleven. It would be useful if readers prepared for the proclamation of this brief text by revisiting the Vigil reading.

In what leads up to the finale, the Lord addresses Israel personally to reassure her of his faithful love. He offers her an open invitation to a free banquet, promises her a great destiny, and issues a call to personal conversion before coming to the conclusion. The last two verses draw on images from nature to highlight the sure power of God's word to achieve its purpose.

Together they form a single sentence. This is a complex unit that will require careful preparation. The development of the imagery takes time. We are led through the whole cycle: rain and snow fall to water the soil, the seed grows to harvest, the grain is gathered, bread is eaten. We are meant to sense the inevitability of each step in the process leading to the next. The reader should adopt a pace that is slow and steady enough to convey the reliability of these natural processes.

It is only when this imagery has engaged the congregation that they will be able to take in the Lord's claim about his word, that it surely carries out his will and succeeds in what it was sent to do. This is the declaration that the reading has built up to. The reader must make sure that the congregation gets this message.

Responsorial Psalm

Ps 64:10–14

R. The seed that falls on good ground
will yield a fruitful harvest.

You care for the earth, give it water,
you fill it with riches.

Your river in heaven brims over
to provide its grain. **R.**

And thus you provide for the earth;
you drench its furrows,
you level it, soften it with showers,
you bless its growth. **R.**

You crown the year with your goodness.
Abundance flows in your steps,
in the pastures of the wilderness it flows. **R.**

The hills are girded with joy,
the meadows covered with flocks,
the valleys are decked with wheat,
They shout for joy, yes, they sing. **R.**

Responsorial Psalm

The choice for the response to the psalm is unusual. It is not from the psalm itself or from elsewhere in the Hebrew scriptures but from the gospel. In this case it is based on a verse from Luke's account of today's parable. This means that it will not be in the congregation's "collective memory".

Readers would be well advised to pause a little longer than usual after the end of the first reading. They should make sure they have the congregation's full attention before proclaiming the response strongly and clearly. They may also need to be ready to assist the congregation with the response in the course of the psalm.

Psalm 64/65 is a song in praise of God who cares for the earth and makes it bear fruit. The psalm ignores the extremes of drought and flood that must have been experienced in ancient times. Its picture of nature is entirely benign. Readers should have no difficulty delivering this in a confident spirit of thankfulness. They will need to give the congregation a clear cue for the response after the shorter third verse.

**A reading from the letter of St Paul to the Romans
8:18–23**

I think that what we suffer in this life can never be compared to the glory, as yet unrevealed, which is waiting for us. The whole creation is eagerly waiting for God to reveal his sons. It was not for any fault on the part of creation that it was made unable to attain its purpose, it was made so by God; but creation still retains the hope of being freed, like us, from its slavery to decadence, to enjoy the same freedom and glory as the children of God. From the beginning till now the entire creation, as we know, has been groaning in one great act of giving birth; and not only creation, but all of us who possess the first-fruits of the Spirit, we too groan inwardly as we wait for our bodies to be set free.

**A reading from the holy Gospel
according to Matthew 13:1–23**

Jesus left the house and sat by the lakeside, but such crowds gathered round him that he got into a boat and sat there. The people all stood on the beach, and he told them many things in parables.

He said, 'Imagine a sower going out to sow. As he sowed, some seeds fell on the edge of the path, and the birds came and ate them up. Others fell on patches of rock where they found little soil and sprang up straight away, because there was no depth of earth; but as soon as the sun came up they were scorched and, not having any roots, they withered away. Others fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. Others fell on rich soil and produced their crop, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. Listen, anyone who has ears!'

Second Reading

In between last Sunday and this we skip over a section of chapter 8 – verses 14–17 in fact. This is a beautiful text that we do not hear in Year A at all; we have to wait for Pentecost Sunday and Trinity Sunday in Years C and B for that. It is worth tracking down for its teaching that we are children of God inspired to cry out “Abba, Father!”

Paul is no stranger to struggle and suffering. He is vividly aware of the mystery of the cross marking his life. Salvation is still being worked out in the life of humankind and in creation itself. Paul likens this to the experience of giving birth; there is everything to hope for but birth can be a messy and painful business. We and creation both “groan” as we await the outcome of God’s work.

Paul’s fertile mind itself gives birth to a stream of ideas, some of which are not easy to understand. What does he mean when he says that “The whole creation is eagerly waiting for God to reveal his sons”? Or that God made creation “unable to attain its purpose”? What is its “slavery to decadence”?

Readers are unlikely to find quick answers to questions that have tested scholars for twenty centuries, but they can get a feel for Paul’s overall message. The prevailing tone is one of realism about the human condition shot through with persistent hope. Readers should examine the reading carefully, identify the key points Paul is making, and give these the emphasis they deserve. The congregation depends on the reader’s ability to lead them through this busy text. As usual the NRSV avoids exclusive language.

Gospel

A pastoral decision will need to be made as to which of the gospel alternatives to take, the longer or the shorter version. A good case can be made for choosing the shorter version. The longer one falls into three parts: the parable itself, Jesus’ teaching on the purpose of parables, and an allegorical explanation of the parable that most scholars consider secondary. In this instance it seems wiser to opt for the shorter gospel and focus on the original parable.

The opening section of the reading sets the scene: such a crowd on the shore of the lake that Jesus must teach from a boat. Note that he adopts the posture of a rabbi – he sits.

[Then the disciples went up to him and asked, ‘Why do you talk to them in parables?’ ‘Because’ he replied ‘the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven are revealed to you, but they are not revealed to them. For anyone who has will be given more, and he will have more than enough; but from anyone who has not, even what he has will be taken away. The reason I talk to them in parables is that they look without seeing and listen without hearing or understanding. So in their case this prophecy of Isaiah is being fulfilled:

You will listen and listen again, but not understand,
see and see again, but not perceive.
For the heart of this nation has grown coarse,
their ears are dull of hearing, and they have shut their eyes,
for fear they should see with their eyes,
hear with their ears,
understand with their heart,
and be converted
and be healed by me.

‘But happy are your eyes because they see, your ears because they hear! I tell you solemnly, many prophets and holy men longed to see what you see, and never saw it; to hear what you hear, and never heard it.

‘You, therefore, are to hear the parable of the sower. When anyone hears the word of the kingdom without understanding, the evil one comes and carries off what was sown in his heart: this is the man who received the seed on the edge of the path. The one who received it on patches of rock is the man who hears the word and welcomes it at once with joy. But he has no root in him, he does not last; let some trial come, or some persecution on account of the word, and he falls away at once. The one who received the seed in thorns is the man who hears the word, but the worries of this world and the lure of riches choke the word and so he produces nothing. And the one who received the seed in rich soil is the man who hears the word and understands it; he is the one who yields a harvest and produces now a hundredfold, now sixty, now thirty.’]

[*Short Form: omit text in brackets.*]

What Jesus describes would have been very familiar to his listeners. How often they would have seen sowers cast seed about them on the fields and hillsides of Galilee. And how well they knew the terrain, some of it fertile soil, much of it rocky and unpromising. What Jesus wants to do is to draw their attention to the extraordinary harvest produced from the rich soil. The contrast between the unimpressive seed that is sown and the abundance of grain that is gathered is remarkable. Without actually saying so, Jesus implies that this is what the kingdom of heaven is like. Its beginnings may be very unpromising, but what it will grow to be is astonishing.

The later interpretation of the parable sought to give meaning to each element of the story – the rock, the thorns, and so on – instead of giving priority to the conclusion and its dramatic implications.

Concluding Prayers

Almighty and all-merciful God,
lover of the human race, healer of all our wounds,
in whom there is no shadow of death,
save us in this time of crisis;
grant wisdom and courage to our leaders;
watch over all medical people
as they tend the sick and work for a cure;
stir in us a sense of solidarity beyond all isolation;
if our doors are closed, let our hearts be open.
By the power of your love destroy the virus of fear,
that hope may never die
and the light of Easter, the triumph of life,
may shine upon us and the whole world.
Through Jesus Christ, the Lord risen from the dead,
who lives and reigns for ever and ever.
Amen.

Holy Mary, health of the sick, pray for us.
St Joseph, guardian of us all, pray for us.

(Most Rev. Mark Coleridge, Archbishop of Brisbane)

or

Gracious God,
We give thanks anew for your providence and presence.
We prayerfully seek your grace, amidst COVID-19 here and overseas.
We pray for those in need of healing.
We pray for your peace with those who are anxious or grieving.
We pray you will continue to strengthen and sustain
all those who are serving in response.
We pray for your Holy Spirit's discernment
amidst the many choices and decisions
facing our national, community and medical leaders.
We pray we each might see quickly what more we can do
to help those who are vulnerable.
This prayer for our nation in the family of nations,
with all that is on our hearts,
we gather now and pray
through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.

(Ecumenical prayer from the National Council of Churches. We have been invited to pray this prayer at 7pm each day.)