

SUNDAY READINGS

READ AT HOME

20th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Year A

16 August 2020



Collect

O God, who have prepared for those who love you
good things which no eye can see,
fill our hearts, we pray, with the warmth of your love,
so that, loving you in all things and above all things,
we may attain your promises,
which surpass every human desire.
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

One of the striking features of the gospels is the unflattering picture they present of the Twelve, Jesus' hand-picked disciples. They are shown to be dull of mind, slow to believe, prone to rivalry and ambition, and when it really mattered, cowardly. Jesus, by contrast, is patient, passionate, steadfast and powerful. What is exceptional is a story in which Jesus is shown as coming off second-best. What is even more extraordinary is that his victor is not only a woman but a foreigner. That's today's gospel story. The Canaanite woman challenged the narrow horizons of Jesus' mission; now her story takes the question to us. How broad is our outlook? How inclusive is our vision? How courageous are we in going beyond what is familiar and comfortable? What is the outreach of our mission?

Paul wrestles with the issue from the opposite perspective. What is the place of his fellow Israelites in God's all-inclusive plan for humankind? Have they been displaced and abandoned in favour of the Gentiles? The readings for today provide much food for thought.

A reading from the prophet Isaiah 56:1, 6–7

Thus says the Lord: Have a care for justice, act with integrity, for soon my salvation will come and my integrity be manifest.

Foreigners who have attached themselves to the Lord to serve him and to love his name and be his servants – all who observe the sabbath, not profaning it, and cling to my covenant – these I will bring to my holy mountain. I will make them joyful in my house of prayer. Their holocausts and their sacrifices will be accepted on my altar, for my house will be called a house of prayer for all the peoples.

First Reading

Anyone who ventures far into the world of the Old Testament soon finds diverse points of view about quite fundamental things. One of these is the issue of Israel and the nations. Over time the Israelites came to identify themselves as a chosen people, a people set apart, distinguished from other nations by their belief in the one God and by the Law which shaped their way of life.

This conviction led to ambivalence about their role in the world and their relationship with other peoples. At times the emphasis lay on their separateness; this had to be jealously safeguarded against contamination. At other times stress was placed on outreach to foreigners and welcome to strangers. Today's reading from Isaiah falls squarely in the openness camp.

Speaking in the Lord's name, the prophet sees foreigners attracted by Israel's beliefs and practices coming to Jerusalem to worship with the people of the covenant. The Temple and its rituals of sacrifice are open to them, for "my house will be called a house of prayer for all peoples" (quoted by Jesus at the cleansing of the temple in Mark 11:17). Of course this hospitality to others remains within the framework of the covenant that is unique to Israel, but it is open and welcoming all the same. What all people are called to, whether Israelite or not, is to "have a care for justice [and] act with integrity".

The ministry of reading is itself an act of hospitality; the reader is offering the congregation an opportunity to "make their home" in God's word. This is the spirit in which today's reading should be delivered.

Responsorial Psalm Ps 66:2–3, 5–6, 8

R. O God, let all the nations praise you!

O God, be gracious and bless us
and let your face shed its light upon us.
So will your ways be known upon earth
and all nations learn your saving help. **R.**

Let the nations be glad and exult
for you rule the world with justice.
With fairness you rule the peoples,
you guide the nations on earth. **R.**

Let the peoples praise you, O God;
let all the peoples praise you.
May God still give us his blessing
till the ends of the earth revere him. **R.**

Responsorial Psalm

Psalm 66/67 breathes the same spirit of openness as the text from Isaiah. It sees Israel's experience of covenant love as a gift to be shared with all peoples. It implies that Israel has a mission to the world, a mission of witness to the all-encompassing love of God.

The responsorial psalm reproduces virtually the whole of the original. It uses the psalm's own repeated refrain – "Let the peoples praise you, O God, let all the peoples praise you" – as the basis for the shortened response.

The form of the psalm is a prayer of petition but the tone is one of joyful appreciation of God's providential guidance of the world.

A reading from the letter of St Paul to the Romans 11:13–15, 29–32

Let me tell you pagans this: I have been sent to the pagans as their apostle, and I am proud of being sent, but the purpose of it is to make my own people envious of you, and in this way save some of them. Since their rejection meant the reconciliation of the world, do you know what their admission will mean? Nothing less than a resurrection from the dead! God never takes back his gifts or revokes his choice.

Just as you changed from being disobedient to God, and now enjoy mercy because of their disobedience, so those who are disobedient now – and only because of the mercy shown to you – will also enjoy mercy eventually. God has imprisoned all men in their own disobedience only to show mercy to all mankind.

A reading from the holy Gospel according to Matthew 15:21–28

Jesus left Gennesaret and withdrew to the region of Tyre and Sidon. Then out came a Canaanite woman from that district and started shouting, ‘Sir, Son of David, take pity on me. My daughter is tormented by a devil.’ But he answered her not a word. And his disciples went and pleaded with him. ‘Give her what she wants,’ they said ‘because she is shouting after us.’ He said in reply, ‘I was sent only to the lost sheep of the House of Israel.’ But the woman had come up and was kneeling at his feet. ‘Lord,’ she said ‘help me.’ He replied, ‘It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the house-dogs.’ She retorted, ‘Ah yes, sir; but even house-dogs can eat the scraps that fall from their master’s table.’ Then Jesus answered her, ‘Woman, you have great faith. Let your wish be granted.’ And from that moment her daughter was well again.

Second Reading

Last Sunday’s reading from Romans introduced Paul’s attempt to deal with the problematic issue of the fate of his fellow Israelites. That was the beginning of chapter 9. Paul goes on to wrestle with the problem for three full chapters. Today and next Sunday we leapfrog over the lengthy argument he has with himself and advance to the conclusions he draws towards the end of chapter 11.

Having established that God has not revoked his covenant with Israel, Paul turns rhetorically to address the pagans (in the NRSV, Gentiles). In a rather tortuous passage he argues that Israel’s disobedience has allowed the pagans to be reconciled with God. In turn the call of the pagans has a divine purpose: to make Israel envious. Provoked to jealousy by the blessings the pagans now enjoy, Israel may turn away from disobedience and find mercy again. In this way it will be clear that “God never takes back his gifts or revokes his choice”.

This is a difficult reading. It has all the complexity and persuasive appeal of a lawyer’s address to the jury. Paul has God in the dock. Readers will need to study the text closely. It may be very helpful to write out the elements of the argument and try to put them in a clear logical order. As always, the better the reader’s grasp of the line of thought, the more likely it is that the congregation will catch the meaning.

Readers will already have noted that the NRSV provides an inclusive language text.

Gospel

The gospel story of the Canaanite woman has its counterparts in ancient literature. There were other tales at the time in which powerless petitioners used their wits to win over their lords with a clever word or two.

There is a degree of paradox in the story. In the cut and thrust of the conversation with the (unnamed) woman, Jesus defends himself with the declaration that he “was sent only to the lost sheep of the House of Israel”. Then what was he doing in pagan territory of “Tyre and Sidon”? He could hardly have been farther away from Jerusalem. Perhaps he was searching for “lost sheep” rather than seeking pagan disciples, but the location suggests a vulnerability on Jesus’ part – he is a long way from home.

It is tempting to put a gloss on Jesus’ dismissive reply to the woman. This is uncalled for; it is entirely consistent with the account he gives of his mandate. Nor is it necessary to interpret the woman’s words (“Son of David” and “Lord”) and behaviour (“kneeling at his feet”) as those of a Jewish believer. Her kneeling, for example, may well have been a pragmatic manoeuvre designed to stop Jesus in his tracks.

What is certain is that the woman’s feistiness and persistence get her the result she wants. It is also certain that Jesus’ ministry from start to finish is focussed on his own people.

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.)