

SUNDAY READINGS

READ AT HOME

Fourth Sunday of Lent

Year B

14 March 2021



Collect

O God, who through your Word
reconcile the human race to yourself in a wonderful way,
grant, we pray,
that with prompt devotion and eager faith
the Christian people may hasten
toward the solemn celebrations to come.
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

By now we are well on our way through this season of repentance and renewal. The word of God today makes it clear that it's time to decide. It's a wholly positive choice that we are offered – to welcome the love that God has poured out on us in Christ – but still we hesitate, afraid to come forth out of darkness into such wonderful light.

Could we be condemning ourselves to a kind of exile, like that suffered by God's people of old? The constant temptation for us is to hold fast to patterns of life simply because they are familiar, though they bring us no lasting joy. As much as we may lament our lot, we let fear paralyse us. Today we are offered the opportunity to open our eyes to the beauty and wonder of God's love for us in Christ. Dare we see ourselves, in that lovely phrase from the letter to the Ephesians, as "God's work of art"? How could we refuse such an invitation?

A reading from the second book of Chronicles 36:14–16, 19–23

All the heads of the priesthood, and the people too, added infidelity to infidelity, copying all the shameful practices of the nations and defiling the Temple that the Lord had consecrated for himself in Jerusalem. The Lord, the God of their ancestors, tirelessly sent them messenger after messenger, since he wished to spare his people and his house. But they ridiculed the messengers of God, they despised his words, they laughed at his prophets, until at last the wrath of the Lord rose so high against his people that there was no further remedy.

Their enemies burned down the Temple of God, demolished the walls of Jerusalem, set fire to all its palaces, and destroyed everything of value in it. The survivors were deported by Nebuchadnezzar to Babylon; they were to serve him and his sons until the kingdom of Persia came to power. This is how the word of the Lord was fulfilled that he spoke through Jeremiah, 'Until this land has enjoyed its sabbath rest, until seventy years have gone by, it will keep sabbath throughout the days of its desolation.'

And in the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, to fulfil the word of the Lord that was spoken through Jeremiah, the Lord roused the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia to issue a proclamation and to have it publicly displayed throughout his kingdom: 'Thus speaks Cyrus king of Persia, "The Lord, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth; he has ordered me to build him a Temple in Jerusalem, in Judah. Whoever there is among you of all his people, may his God be with him! Let him go up."'

Responsorial Psalm

Ps 136

R. Let my tongue be silenced, if I ever forget you!

By the rivers of Babylon
there we sat and wept,
remembering Zion;
on the poplars that grew there
we hung up our harps. **R.**

For it was there that they asked us,
our captors, for songs,
our oppressors, for joy.
'Sing to us,' they said,
'one of Zion's songs.' **R.**

O how could we sing
the song of the Lord
on alien soil?
If I forget you, Jerusalem,
let my right hand wither! **R.**

O let my tongue
cleave my mouth
if I remember you not,
if I prize not Jerusalem
above all my joys! **R.**

First Reading

Chapter 36 not only concludes the second book of Chronicles but also brings the Jewish Bible to a resounding conclusion. Its last words are those of Cyrus: "Whoever there is among you of all his people, may his God be with him! Let him go up". The nightmare of exile in Babylon is over, and God's people are free to return to Jerusalem and begin again.

Today's reading provides a summary of the catastrophe that was the exile: the infidelity that led to it, the destruction it entailed, and the opportunity for Israel to make a fresh start. The author is determined to make it clear that all of this is God's work – both the punishment Israel experiences and its restoration. The prophet Jeremiah and the Persian king in turn are instruments of divine providence.

There are some challenges with the reading, though more for the congregation than the reader. The first is that it begins abruptly on a note of general condemnation, without any context or prior explanation. The second is the transition between the two parts of the reading. Because verses 17-18 are omitted, there is a missing link between "there was no further remedy" and "Their enemies burned down the Temple . . .". The identity of these enemies – they are in fact the Chaldeans – is left unclear. Readers would be wise to check and practise the pronunciation of "Nebuchadnezzar".

This reading deals with the most dramatic episode in the history of God's ancient people. It should be read with vigour and strength. The final words especially should be proclaimed with positive energy as befits the message.

Responsorial Psalm

Most of Psalm 136/137 is in the form of a poignant lament uttered by the exiles in Babylon. The verses that we pray are a perfect match for the first reading. The concluding verses are never used in the lectionary because they voice a shockingly vengeful curse against Babylon.

But the response itself is a kind of curse. The psalmist swears an oath against himself, that he should be struck dumb if he ever forgot Jerusalem.

The reader has a twofold challenge with this psalm. The first is to convey the depth of feeling it contains. Laments like this are found quite rarely in the lectionary; it will take special care to capture its true spirit. The second is allied to the first. The lines of each verse are exceptionally brief, and the temptation will be to run them on into one another. If this happens, much of the poetry and pathos are likely to be lost. This is a psalm that needs to be prayed with profound sensitivity.

**A reading from the letter of St Paul
to the Ephesians**

2:4–10

God loved us with so much love that he was generous with his mercy: when we were dead through our sins, he brought us to life with Christ - it is through grace that you have been saved - and raised us up with him and gave us a place with him in heaven, in Christ Jesus.

This was to show for all ages to come, through his goodness towards us in Christ Jesus, how infinitely rich he is in grace. Because it is by grace that you have been saved, through faith; not by anything of your own, but by a gift from God; not by anything that you have done, so that nobody can claim the credit. We are God's work of art, created in Christ Jesus to live the good life as from the beginning he had meant us to live it.

**A reading from the holy Gospel
according to John**

3:14–21

Jesus said to Nicodemus:

'The Son of Man must be lifted up as Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert, so that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him.

Yes, God loved the world so much that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believed in him may not be lost but may have eternal life.

For God sent his Son into the world not to condemn the world, but so that through him the world might be saved.

No one who believes in him will be condemned; but whoever refuses to believe is condemned already,

because he has refused to believe in the name of God's only Son.

On these grounds is sentence pronounced: that though the light has come into the world men have shown they prefer darkness to the light because their deeds were evil.

And indeed, everybody who does wrong hates the light and avoids it, for fear his actions should be exposed; but the man who lives by the truth comes out into the light, so that it may be plainly seen that what he does is done in God.'

Second Reading

The reading from Ephesians is pure good news. By God's goodness and mercy we have been raised to life in Christ and given a place in him. This is all grace, all gift. In these few verses we have the essence of the gospel preached by Paul – we are saved by the grace of God, not by our own efforts.

This is a beautiful text which should be a great pleasure for readers to announce. It is full of appreciation for the generous love God has lavished on us in Christ. Scholars may argue about the accuracy of the translation in the phrase "we are God's work of art", but for many of us this is an inspired formulation.

If there is any difficulty for the reader it lies in the first long and complex sentence. It falls into two unequal halves, the first being the short section up to the colon. The second and longer half is where the challenge arises. The flow of thought is interrupted by the declaration: "it is through grace that you have been saved". Readers need to proclaim this in such a way that the congregation hears it as an aside and does not lose the drift of the whole sentence.

Gospel

Readings from John dominate the Lenten gospel selections for Years A and B; only in Year C is there an exception, when we hear mostly from Luke. Today we hear a section from Jesus' dialogue with the Pharisee Nicodemus in Chapter 3 of John. While both translations set out the whole text as Jesus' speech, scholars suggest that after the first sentence all that follows is the gospel writer's commentary.

In that first sentence Jesus recalls the episode recounted in the book of Numbers (21:1-9) when the Israelites who were bitten by deadly snakes in the desert were saved by gazing at the bronze serpent raised by Moses. The phrase "lifted up" is intentionally ambiguous, suggesting both crucifixion and resurrection.

The reflection that follows plays off a series of opposing characters in the drama of salvation: the divine and the human, condemnation and salvation, belief and the refusal to believe, light and darkness. The gift is great – eternal life through believing in God's only Son – and the choice is ours. By contemplating the crucified and risen Lord we can come to see the truth of God's love and live in its light. This gospel should be read in a thoughtful, meditative manner.

Concluding Prayer

Prayer over the People (Fourth Sunday of Lent)

Look upon those who call to you, O Lord,
and sustain the weak;
give life by your unfailing light
to those who walk in the shadow of death,
and bring those rescued by your mercy from every evil
to reach the highest good.
Through Christ our Lord.

Amen.

And 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 Prayer over the People for the Fourth Sunday of Lent,
Roman Missal p. 272.)