

SUNDAY READINGS

READ AT HOME

5th Sunday of Easter

Year B

2 May 2021



Collect

Almighty ever-living God,
constantly accomplish the Paschal Mystery within us,
that those you were pleased to make new in Holy Baptism
may, under your protective care, bear much fruit
and come to the joys of life eternal.

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

At this point in the Easter season it is worth stepping back to see it in perspective. We can imagine it as a great tree that thrusts its roots deep down in the soil even as its trunk and branches grow upward and outwards. The hidden roots draw nourishment from deep under the earth and fuel the visible growth of the tree.

The gospel readings for the next two Sundays and for Pentecost Sunday, taken from Jesus' farewell speech to his disciples in the gospel of John, invite us on an interior journey into the depths of our hearts. It is there that Jesus makes his home in us; it is there that the Paraclete teaches us all wisdom. As with the tree, the more our faith is fed from deep within, the stronger is our desire to let love loose in the world.

The stories from the Acts of the Apostles have already been taking us on an outer journey. They allow us to be present at the birth of the early Church and to accompany its first steps. Under the impetus of the Holy Spirit the Christian way begins to spread, like the branches of the tree. It starts to take shape for all to see.

In Eastertide the Church drinks deeply from the well-spring of the Spirit and finds fresh inspiration for its mission in the world.

A reading from the Acts of the Apostles 9:26–31

When Saul got to Jerusalem he tried to join the disciples, but they were all afraid of him: they could not believe he was really a disciple. Barnabas, however, took charge of him, introduced him to the apostles, and explained how the Lord had appeared to Saul and spoken to him on his journey, and how he had preached boldly at Damascus in the name of Jesus. Saul now started to go round with them in Jerusalem, preaching fearlessly in the name of the Lord. But after he had spoken to the Hellenists, and argued with them, they became determined to kill him. When the brothers knew, they took him to Caesarea, and sent him off from there to Tarsus.

The churches throughout Judaea, Galilee and Samaria were now left in peace, building themselves up, living in the fear of the Lord, and filled with the consolation of the Holy Spirit.

First Reading

Luke is so convinced of the importance of Paul's conversion for the life and mission of the early Church that he tells the story at length three times (in Acts 9, 22 and 26). Today's text, taken from the first version, recounts the sequel to Paul's conversion. Note that in this account he is still referred to as Saul, and that this part of the story is hard to reconcile with what he writes in his letter to the Galatians (1:18-24).

The passage that we have reads as an action-packed mini-drama. It begins with the fear of the disciples in Jerusalem, in language reminiscent of their anxiety and disbelief when the risen Lord first appeared to them. Then we are introduced to Barnabas, another key figure in the early mission of the Church associated with Paul; his words reassure the community. Next we have a cameo of Paul's missionary experience: bold preaching, hostile reaction, moving on. And finally resolution in another of Luke's idealised portraits of the early Church.

In their preparation readers should allow themselves to be drawn into the dynamism of the story. Luke wants his readership to sense the invincible power of the Holy Spirit at work in missionaries like Saul and Barnabas and in the inner life of the young Churches. This is what readers who announce this story with energy and assurance will enable their congregations to do. Theirs is a privileged ministry indeed.

Responsorial Psalm

Ps 21:26–28, 30–32

R. I will praise you, Lord, in the assembly of your people.

or

R. Alleluia.

My vows I will pay before those who fear him.
The poor shall eat and shall have their fill.
They shall praise the Lord, those who seek him.
May their hearts live for ever and ever! **R.**

All the earth shall remember and return to the Lord,
all families of the nations worship before him.
They shall worship him, all the mighty of the earth;
before him shall bow all who go down to the dust. **R.**

And my soul shall live for him, my children serve him.
They shall tell of the Lord to generations yet to come,
declare his faithfulness to peoples yet unborn:
'These things the Lord has done.' **R.**

Responsorial Psalm

It may surprise some to learn that today's responsorial psalm, with its tone of steadfast faith and confident praise, is part of the psalm that begins with the heart-rending cry, "My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?" Psalm 21/22 falls into two contrasting parts; it begins with an urgent plea for help in great distress, but finishes with thanksgiving and praise. Fittingly, we hear from the first part on Passion Sunday, and from the second part on this 5th Sunday of Easter. In fact today we pray the concluding verses of the psalm.

As the author of the psalm offers thanks for his own deliverance, he extends the circle of gratitude and blessing ever wider. Step by step he calls on the assembly, the poor, all the earth, the families of nations, the mighty of the earth, and future generations to join in the chorus of praise.

Readers should find no difficulty entering into the up-beat spirit of this prayer. If there is a challenge it lies in the relatively long lines of the verses; readers will need to sustain their delivery throughout each of the four-line stanzas.

A reading from the first letter of St John 3:18–24

My children,
our love is not to be just words or mere talk,
but something real and active;
only by this can we be certain
that we are the children of the truth
and be able to quieten our conscience in his presence,
whatever accusations it may raise against us,
because God is greater than our conscience and he
knows everything.
My dear people,
if we cannot be condemned by our own conscience,
we need not be afraid in God's presence,
and whatever we ask him,
we shall receive,
because we keep his commandments
and live the kind of life that he wants.
His commandments are these:
that we believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ
and that we love one another
as he told us to.
Whoever keeps his commandments
lives in God and God lives in him.
We know that he lives in us
by the Spirit that he has given us.

A reading from the holy Gospel according to John

15:1–8

Jesus said to his disciples:

'I am the true vine,
and my Father is the vinedresser.
Every branch in me that bears no fruit
he cuts away,
and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes
to make it bear even more.
You are pruned already,
by means of the word that I have spoken to you.
Make your home in me, as I make mine in you.
As a branch cannot bear fruit all by itself,
but must remain part of the vine,
neither can you unless you remain in me.
I am the vine,
you are the branches.
Whoever remains in me, with me in him,
bears fruit in plenty;
for cut off from me you can do nothing.
Anyone who does not remain in me
is like a branch that has been thrown away
- he withers;
these branches are collected and thrown on the fire,
and they are burnt.
If you remain in me
and my words remain in you,
you may ask what you will
and you shall get it.
It is to the glory of my Father that you should bear
much fruit,
and then you will be my disciples."

Second Reading

Today's extract from the first letter of John continues in the same vein as previous passages. The style is that of an intimate exhortation given to the community of disciples by its revered leader. They are addressed as "my children" and "my dear people". As before, one should not look for a logically ordered exposition of ideas. What we have is more like a meandering meditation on faith and love: faith in Jesus Christ and love for one another.

The ingredients of this meditation are many and varied: love-in-action, truth, the voice of conscience, confident prayer, God's commandments, mutual indwelling, and the gift of the Spirit. These are all interconnected and interactive. Readers should proclaim the reading with warmth and at an unhurried pace.

The opening lines about the practice of love (echoing what James has to say much more forthrightly in his letter) should catch everyone's attention. The first two sentences are rather extended as the author's thought evolves; they will require special care on the part of readers. All in all, the congregation should feel invited to reflect with the author on the mystery of divine-human love.

Gospel

Given the importance of vineyards and grape-growing in the world of the Old Testament, it is no surprise that the image of the vine looms large as a symbol for Israel. The prophets Hosea, Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel all played with it, as does Jesus in a number of parables. Here in the gospel of John he identifies himself as the "true vine" and his disciples as its branches.

It is an image pregnant with meaning. It has connotations of life, growth, fruitfulness and unity, plus their contraries. This section of Jesus' farewell discourse makes reference to themes elaborated on elsewhere: the word of God, dwelling in Jesus, the power of prayer, the glory of God.

Jesus' reflections do not proceed in a straight line. It may be best to think of them in terms of a spiral, as words and ideas suggest others that lead us more and more deeply into the mystery. As much as they affirm the profound union of life that the Christian community shares with Jesus, they also serve to warn of the dangers of breaking fellowship with him.

This is serious teaching that needs to be delivered with a wise combination of warmth and forthrightness.

Blessing for Easter

May God, who by the Resurrection of his Only Begotten Son
was pleased to confer on us
the gift of redemption and of adoption,
give us gladness by his blessing.

Amen.

May he, by whose redeeming work
we have received the gift of everlasting freedom,
make us heirs to an eternal inheritance.

Amen.

And may we, who have already risen with Christ
in Baptism through faith,
by living in a right manner on this earth,
be united with him in the homeland of heaven.

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 Solemn Blessing for Easter Time, Roman Missal p 712.)