

SUNDAY READINGS

READ AT HOME

Sixteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Year B

18 July 2021



Collect

Show favour, O Lord, to your servants
and mercifully increase the gifts of your grace,
that, made fervent in hope, faith and charity,
they may be ever watchful in keeping your commands.
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

It's fair to say that these days we suffer from a surplus of information and a deficit of wisdom. We are at risk of drowning in a tsunami of information. So much data is literally at our fingertips: a stroke of the keyboard gives us immediate access to a universe of knowledge. It can be overwhelming. How can we make sense of it all? How can we distinguish between what is reliable and unreliable, between fact and opinion, between what is relevant and what isn't?

Great faiths and philosophies promise a knowing of another kind. It's a knowing of the heart, a treasure of wisdom hidden deep within. Discovering this wisdom requires patient seeking and listening. Even more, the seeker of wisdom must make room for the truth that is discovered, must be ready to surrender attitudes and desires that are the stuff of folly.

In the Christian tradition, true wisdom is the wisdom of the cross. This is the wisdom Jesus taught by his preaching, his deeds of power, and his way of life. It is the wisdom that his Spirit reveals in the heart of the Church. Without it we are like the crowd in today's gospel, "sheep without a shepherd".

A reading from the prophet Jeremiah 23:1–6

'Doom for the shepherds who allow the flock of my pasture to be destroyed and scattered - it is the Lord who speaks! This, therefore, is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says about the shepherds in charge of my people: You have let my flock be scattered and go wandering and have not taken care of them. Right, I will take care of you for your misdeeds - it is the Lord who speaks! But the remnant of my flock I myself will gather from all the countries where I have dispersed them, and will bring them back to their pastures: they shall be fruitful and increase in numbers. I will raise up shepherds to look after them and pasture them; no fear, no terror for them any more; not one shall be lost - it is the Lord who speaks!

'See the days are coming - it is the Lord who speaks - when I will raise a virtuous Branch for David, who will reign as true king and be wise, practising honesty and integrity in the land. In his days Judah will be saved and Israel dwell in confidence. and this is the name he will be called: The Lord-our-integrity.'

First Reading

The role of the king in ancient Israel was deeply ambiguous. Ideally kings were "good shepherds" of God's people, representing the Lord, guiding the people wisely, keeping them safe, protecting the weak, administering justice. But the reality was often very different. In practice many of them behaved like the rulers of other nations, amassed power and wealth for themselves, and introduced the worship of foreign religious gods. Prophets like Ezekiel and Jeremiah were scathing in their criticism of the false shepherds who brought the disaster of the exile on the people.

In today's passage (anticipating the gospel in which Jesus has pity on the people because "they were like sheep without a shepherd"), Jeremiah issues both condemnation and encouragement. The leaders are denounced but the people are reassured. True shepherds are promised, in particular a king who will be wise and honest and will rule with integrity. Whether or not any historical figure can be identified with this "virtuous branch for David", Christian believers will see Jeremiah's promise as coming to fulfilment in the person of Jesus.

Readers will see that the reading falls into three parts, each of which requires its own manner of delivery. The first part is the denunciation of the false shepherds. The tone here is accusing and severe. The middle part is a promise of restoration for the people. The tone of this section is both authoritative and warmly encouraging. The third and final part is in the form of an oracle. It is a prophetic declaration that calls for strong and confident proclamation. Altogether this is a text that gives readers a very good opportunity to put their gifts to work.

Responsorial Psalm

Ps 22

R. The Lord is my shepherd;
there is nothing I shall want.

The Lord is my shepherd;
there is nothing I shall want.
Fresh and green are the pastures
where he gives me repose.
Near restful waters he leads me,
to revive my drooping spirit. R.

He guides me along the right path;
he is true to his name.
If I should walk in the valley of darkness
no evil would I fear.
You are there with your crook and your staff;
with these you give me comfort. R.

You have prepared a banquet for me
in the sight of my foes.
My head you have anointed with oil;
my cup is overflowing. R.

Surely goodness and kindness shall follow me
all the days of my life.
In the Lord's own house shall I dwell
for ever and ever. R.

Responsorial Psalm

In its original context Psalm 22/23 identifies the Lord, Israel's God, as shepherd. Following on today from Jeremiah's prophetic preaching, it reaffirms Israel's belief that God alone is the true shepherd; the kings of the land are shepherds only to the extent that they rule in accordance with divine justice.

Understandably this psalm is one of the best known and most loved of all. It appears several times in the three year cycle but only on this occasion with the opening verse as the response. The challenge for readers, apart from dealing with verses of different lengths, is to proclaim the all-too-familiar words as if they had just been discovered. They need to bring a firm freshness to the text and avoid any hint of sentimentality.

The images are strong and plentiful: shepherding, green pastures, restful waters, the valley of darkness, a banquet, the Lord's own house. One after the other they build up a heart-warming sense of God's personal and protective love. This should be a joy to read.

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

2:13–18

In Christ Jesus, you that used to be so far from us have been brought very close, by the blood of Christ. For he is the peace between us, and has made the two into one and broken down the barrier which used to keep them apart, actually destroying in his own person the hostility caused by the rules and decrees of the Law. This was to create one single New Man in himself out of the two of them and by restoring peace through the cross, to unite them both in a single Body and reconcile them with God. In his own person he killed the hostility. Later he came to bring the good news of peace, peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near at hand. Through him, both of us have in the one Spirit our way to come to the Father.

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

6:30–34

The apostles rejoined Jesus and told him all they had done and taught. Then he said to them, 'You must come away to some lonely place all by yourselves and rest for a while'; for there were so many coming and going that the apostles had no time even to eat. So they went off in a boat to a lonely place where they could be by themselves. But people saw them going, and many could guess where; and from every town they all hurried to the place on foot and reached it before them. So as he stepped ashore he saw a large crowd; and he took pity on them because they were like sheep without a shepherd, and he set himself to teach them at some length.

Second Reading

The letter to the Ephesians offers an expansive account of the mystery of God's designs for the world, a mystery revealed to us in the person of Jesus Christ. Today's short extract centres on the reconciliation brought about paradoxically by Jesus' violent death on the cross. This reconciliation is two-fold. Jews and Gentiles are reconciled with each other, and together they are reconciled with God.

Unfortunately, because of where the reading begins, readers and congregations alike may be puzzled as to who is meant by "you" and "us" in the opening phrase "you that used to be so far from us". The text as we have it does not identify them. It is helpful to go to the Bible and read the preceding few verses which make it clear that "you" are the Gentiles and "us" are the Jews.

The reading also sheds no light on what is meant by "the hostility caused by the rules and decrees of the Law". Nor does it explain how his bodily death on the cross has "broken down the barrier" and "killed the hostility" between Jew and Gentile. However strangely, Jesus' death has brought peace to them, made them "one single New Man" (NRSV "one new humanity"), and reconciled them to one another and to God. Theologians still struggle to offer good explanations of how this is so. What is clear, however, is that this is good news for us all. Through Christ and in the Spirit, both those "who were far away" and those "who were near at hand" have access to the Father.

There is much food for thought in these few verses. They should be read steadily and strongly so that congregations really hear the good news they contain.

Gospel

One of the features of Mark's writing is his habit of enclosing a story within a story. We saw this a few Sundays ago when he incorporated the cure of the woman with the haemorrhage into the story of Jairus' daughter. Last Sunday we read of the mission of the Twelve, and today we'll pick up from their return. In between these two passages Mark inserts the story of the beheading of John the Baptist, but this has been omitted from the cycle of Sunday readings even though it is also recorded by Matthew.

Today's passage about the return of the apostles, their being taken aside by Jesus, the arrival of the crowd, and Jesus' taking pity on the people rounds off the mission episode and prepares the way for the feeding story. The final verse serves as the springboard for what follows. The people were "like sheep without a shepherd" so Jesus "began to teach them many things".

It's striking that he feeds the crowd first with his teaching and only later with the loaves and fish. By way of contrast, in John's gospel from which we'll read over the next five Sundays, Jesus feeds the people first with the loaves and the fish, then responds to their questioning by teaching them at length about the bread of life. We will hear the whole of this discourse through the coming weeks.

Concluding Prayer

Solemn Blessing (Ordinary Time III)

May almighty God bless us in his kindness
and pour out saving wisdom upon us.

Amen.

May he nourish us always with the teachings of the faith
and make us persevere in holy deeds.

Amen.

May he turn our steps towards himself
and show us the path of charity and peace.

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 Ordinary Time III, Roman Missal p. 715)