

SUNDAY READINGS

READ AT HOME

Seventeenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Year B

25 July 2021



Collect

O God, protector of those who hope in you,
without whom nothing has firm foundation, nothing is holy,
bestow in abundance your mercy upon us
and grant that, with you as our ruler and guide,
we may use the good things that pass
in such a way as to hold fast even now
to those that ever endure.

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

Everyone can see that Mark's gospel is the shortest of the four; scholars are agreed that it is also the first. Because of its brevity, the framers of the lectionary saw that there was not enough material to last for the whole of Ordinary Time. To remedy this, they have inserted a series of five readings from the sixth chapter of John's gospel. They begin with the feeding of the crowd, continue with Jesus' teaching on the bread of life, and conclude with the departure of many of his disciples.

Those who will derive most benefit from this interlude are those who are familiar with the Old Testament stories and themes that lie behind the episode. John assumes that his readers will know the story of Israel's exodus from Egypt, their journey through the desert, their being fed with both manna and the word of God, and the meaning of the Passover celebration.

There are other connections with Old Testament traditions such as Elisha's feeding of the prophets and the banquet given by Wisdom. Perhaps these five Sundays will prompt you to delve a little more into the books of the Jewish scriptures. They shaped the faith of Jesus, they continue to inspire our Jewish brothers and sisters, and they illuminate all that we believe and hope for.

A reading from the second book of Kings 4:42–44

A man came from Baal-shalishah, bringing Elisha, the man of God, bread from the first-fruits, twenty barley loaves and fresh grain in the ear. 'Give it to the people to eat,' Elisha said. But his servant replied, 'How can I serve this to a hundred men?' 'Give it to the people to eat' he insisted for the Lord says this, "They will eat and have some over." He served them; they ate and had some over, as the Lord had said.

First Reading

The stories of the prophet Elijah and his successor Elisha in 1 and 2 Kings make for great reading. They're colourful and engaging. Just before today's very short passage, there's an amusing tale of Elisha saving a band of prophets by throwing flour into a pot of stew made with poisonous plants.

The story of Elisha's feeding one hundred men with twenty barley loaves and having some left over is clearly echoed in the gospel accounts of Jesus feeding the multitude. They all have the same elements in common. Food is brought to the prophetic figure, the amount is detailed, an objection is raised about the inadequacy of the supply, the prophet orders the distribution of the food, and it turns out that there is more than enough.

It is always important for readers not to commence their proclamation until they have the congregation's attention. It is even more the case when the reading is as short as this, otherwise it will be over before everyone has tuned in. The text itself should pose no great problem for the reader, except for the pronunciation of "Baal-shalishah" which should be checked in the guide in the last pages of this book. Interestingly the NRSV dispenses with the challenge by omitting the place name altogether.

Responsorial Psalm

Ps 144:10–11, 15–18

R. The hand of the Lord feeds us;
he answers all our needs.

All your creatures shall thank you, O Lord,
and your friends shall repeat their blessing.
They shall speak of the glory of your reign
and declare your might, O God. R.

The eyes of all creatures look to you
and you give them their food in due time.
You open wide your hand,
grant the desires of all who live. R.

The Lord is just in all his ways
and loving in all his deeds.
He is close to all who call him,
who call on him from their hearts. R.

Responsorial Psalm

From start to finish Psalm 144/145 is a song of praise extolling the goodness of God. It does not mix praise and lament as many psalms do.

The response and the selected verses connect immediately with the story of Elisha that has just been proclaimed. The response has been adapted from the psalm itself to make the connection with the feeding story quite explicit. Being a combination of two short declarations, the response needs to be proclaimed with care. An upward inflection when the reader pauses at the end of the first line will ensure that the congregation does not come in with the response before it is time.

Readers will note that the response and the third verse of the responsorial psalm are third-person statements, while the first two verses are addressed directly to God. The tone throughout is one of trusting confidence and thankfulness.

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

4:1-6

I, the prisoner in the Lord, implore you to lead a life worthy of your vocation. Bear with one another charitably, in complete selflessness, gentleness and patience. Do all you can to preserve the unity of the Spirit by the peace that binds you together. There is one Body, one Spirit, just as you were all called into one and the same hope when you were called. There is one Lord, one faith, one baptism, and one God who is Father of all, through all and within all.

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

6:1-15

Jesus went off to the other side of the Sea of Galilee - or of Tiberias - and a large crowd followed him, impressed by the signs he gave by curing the sick. Jesus climbed the hillside, and sat down there with his disciples. It was shortly before the Jewish feast of Passover.

Looking up, Jesus saw the crowds approaching and said to Philip, 'Where can we buy some bread for these people to eat?' He only said this to test Philip; he himself knew exactly what he was going to do. Philip answered, 'Two hundred denarii would only buy enough to give them a small piece each.' One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, said, 'There is a small boy here with five barley loaves and two fish; but what is that between so many?' Jesus said to them, 'Make the people sit down.' There was plenty of grass there, and as many as five thousand men sat down. Then Jesus took the loaves, gave thanks and gave them out to all who were sitting ready; he then did the same with the fish, giving out as much as was wanted. When they had eaten enough he said to the disciples, 'Pick up the pieces left over, so that nothing gets wasted.' So they picked them up, and filled twelve hampers with scraps left over from the meal of five barley loaves. The people, seeing this sign that he had given, said, 'This really is the prophet who is to come into the world.' Jesus, who could see they were about to come and take him by force and make him king, escaped back to the hills by himself.

Second Reading

After just two readings from the early part of the letter to the Ephesians, we now begin a series of five from the later chapters which spell out the demands of Christian living. Even if this is not a genuine letter of Paul's, the intermingling of practical directives with profound theology is Pauline in style.

And just as news of divisions and factions in his communities prompted Paul to write and appeal for unity, so here the author makes the same plea. He does so in the name of Paul as "the prisoner in the Lord". This is much more than a practical concern for the smooth functioning of the community. The unity of the community arises from and must reflect the unity inherent in God's cosmic plan. This is spelt out in a kind of litany. There is one body, one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all.

The first half of the reading should be proclaimed as a heartfelt appeal made with deep feeling. The second half is a strong and positive declaration of faith; it should not be hurried through.

Readers will note that the NRSV leaves the reading in two long sentences. If this version is being used, it will require careful preparation.

Gospel

The story of the feeding of the crowd must have captured the imagination of the early Christian community. It is the only miracle story common to all four gospels, and two versions are to be found in Matthew and in Mark.

John's version has some features of its own. He alone identifies the crowd's motivation: "because they saw the signs that he was doing for the sick" (NRSV). John situates the event on a hillside, connects it with the Passover, and specifies the names of Philip and Andrew. As he tells it, Jesus does not break the bread for the disciples to distribute but proceeds with the distribution of the loaves and the fish himself. Only John comments that Jesus had to flee because of the messianic expectations his actions aroused. While there are parallels with the story of Elisha feeding the men with barley loaves and having some left over, there are also links with the story of the exodus and the manna in the desert.

Each episode of a sign given by Jesus is narrated in John's gospel with dramatic flair, and the feeding of the crowd is no exception. Action and dialogue are masterfully interwoven. While it is a very familiar story, when well-read it still has the capacity to engage the congregation's attention.

Concluding Prayer

Solemn Blessing (Ordinary Time IV)

May the God of all consolation order our days in his peace
and grant us the gifts of his blessing.

Amen.

May he free us always from every distress
and confirm our hearts in his love.

Amen.

So that on this life's journey
we may be effective in good works,
rich in the gifts of hope, faith and charity,
and may come happily to eternal life.

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 IV, Roman Missal p. 716)