

# SUNDAY READINGS

## READ AT HOME

Fourteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Year B

4 July 2021



### Collect

O God, who in the abasement of your Son  
have raised up a fallen world,  
fill your faithful with holy joy,  
for on those you have rescued from slavery to sin  
you bestow eternal gladness.  
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

How do you react when someone confronts you with an unwelcome truth? It's remarkable how many tactics we have at our fingertips to deal with such threatening experiences. We can go into denial, become angry, or indulge in self-pity; there's no limit to our defence mechanisms. A favourite strategy, used all too often by public figures, is to "shoot the messenger". They are not alone. We too, once threatened, can almost instinctively deflect attention by accusing and denigrating the other.

The bearers of God's word in ancient Israel, prophets like Ezekiel and Jeremiah, were treated in exactly this way. What is surprising is to discover that Jesus himself appears to have been shocked by behaviour like this. His own townsfolk refused to believe he could have anything worthwhile to say – didn't they know him to be just an ordinary local like themselves?

It takes courage to search out and admit to the tricks that we use to keep the truth at bay. A saying to ponder over long and hard is Jesus' word to the Jewish authorities, "the truth will set you free". Dare we believe it?

## **A reading from the prophet Ezekiel**

**2:2–5**

The spirit came into me and made me stand up, and I heard the Lord speaking to me. He said, 'Son of man, I am sending you up to the Israelites, to the rebels who have turned against me. Till now they and their ancestors have been in revolt against me. The sons are defiant and obstinate; I am sending you to them, to say, "The Lord says this." Whether they listen or not, this set of rebels shall know there is a prophet among them.'

## **First Reading**

This short passage from the prophet Ezekiel anticipates the proverb that Jesus will quote in the gospel for today: "A prophet is only despised in his own country among his own relations and in his own house". Strangely enough, even though this proverb neatly sums up the experience of Israel's prophets, it does not appear anywhere in the Old Testament. It's neither in the books of the prophets themselves nor in the collections of proverbs that form much of the wisdom literature.

Once again, the text chosen for today is made more difficult for the congregation to understand because it does not give any clues as to context. What leads up to this passage, described in the first chapter of the book, is a vision of divine glory that Ezekiel has. It is so overwhelming that he falls to the ground. Without this background it is hard to make sense of the first words of today's reading: "The spirit came into me and made me stand up". It is worth noting that the NRSV lectionary inserts a verse from the end of Chapter 1 to provide this missing link.

Ezekiel's task as a prophet is a daunting one. Just as Jeremiah had the thankless task of warning his contemporaries about the looming disaster of the exile, so Ezekiel has the mandate to interpret the exile as divine punishment for Israel's infidelity. Each of them had an unwelcome message that was sure to generate resistance and rejection. Jesus found himself facing the same experience.

After the brief introduction, the remainder of the reading consists of God's commission to Ezekiel and his word of judgement. It therefore needs to be read strongly and with deliberate authority.

## **Responsorial Psalm**

R. Our eyes are fixed on the Lord,  
pleading for his mercy.

To you have I lifted up my eyes,  
you who dwell in the heavens:  
my eyes, like the eyes of slaves  
on the hand of their lords. R.

Like the eyes of a servant  
on the hand of his mistress,  
so our eyes are on the Lord our God  
till he shows us his mercy. R.

Have mercy on us, Lord, have mercy.  
We are filled with contempt.  
Indeed all too full is our soul  
with the scorn of the rich,  
with the proud man's disdain. R.

## **Ps 122**

## **Responsorial Psalm**

Usually the responsorial psalm complements the first reading, but today the opposite is the case. As we've heard, the prophet Ezekiel was sent by God to speak to defiant and obstinate rebels who have turned a deaf ear to God's word. In stark contrast the psalm is the prayer of a humble and repentant people who plead for God's mercy.

Psalm 122/123 is one of a series of short psalms called "Songs of Ascent" perhaps because they were prayed by pilgrims on their way up to the temple. The whole of the psalm is used here, with a response inspired by some of its phrases.

The tone of the psalm is entirely different from that of the first reading. More than ever there should be a significant pause between the reading and the psalm to mark the change of mood. Both the response and the verses should be prayed in a spirit of contrition and heartfelt trust. The short lines should not be hurried or run on into one another. Remember, the psalms are poem-prayers, not stories.

**A reading from the second letter of  
St Paul to the Corinthians**

**12:7–10**

In view of the extraordinary nature of these revelations, to stop me from getting too proud I was given a thorn in the flesh, an angel of Satan to beat me and stop me from getting too proud! About this thing, I have pleaded with the Lord three times for it to leave me, but he has said, 'My grace is enough for you: my power is at its best in weakness.' So I shall be very happy to make my weaknesses my special boast so that the power of Christ may stay over me, and that is why I am quite content with my weaknesses, and with insults, hardships, persecutions, and the agonies I go through for Christ's sake. For it is when I am weak that I am strong.

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

**6:1–6**

Jesus went to his home town and his disciples accompanied him. With the coming of the sabbath he began teaching in the synagogue and most of them were astonished when they heard him. They said, 'Where did the man get all this? What is this wisdom that has been granted him, and these miracles that are worked through him? This is the carpenter, surely, the son of Mary, the brother of James and Joset and Jude and Simon? His sisters, too, are they not here with us?' And they would not accept him. And Jesus said to them, 'A prophet is only despised in his own country among his own relations and in his own house'; and he could work no miracle there, though he cured a few sick people by laying his hands on them. He was amazed at their lack of faith.

**Second Reading**

This final excerpt from 2 Corinthians comes from a very long section of the letter – the concluding four chapters, from 10:1 to 13:10 – in which Paul argues aggressively in defence of his apostolic mandate and mission. He finds himself compelled to boast at length about his qualifications and his hardships, using all his rhetorical skills to support his claim. There is no mistaking the passion with which he writes.

One of his boasts is that he was given extraordinary visions and revelations. Today's reading follows on from this declaration. In a striking manoeuvre he boldly declares that to stop him "from getting too proud" of these exceptional experiences, he was afflicted with a mysterious "thorn in the flesh". In spite of much speculation, the exact nature of this affliction has never been identified. But mention of it prompts Paul to make a more general point. His weaknesses and hardships serve to make him trust all the more in the grace of God and the power of Christ rather than in his own strengths. Hence the paradoxical statement: "For it is when I am weak that I am strong".

Readers who go to the trouble of reading this passage in its context will see immediately that Paul is in full flight. He's been stung by the criticisms that have been made about him and replies with deep feeling. For all the talk of weakness, this is a powerful passage. It needs to be delivered assertively enough for the congregation to get a good sense of Paul's full-on fervour. The second-last sentence is quite long – in fact it is really two sentences joined by "and". Readers will need to take time and care to give each of the two statements its proper weight.

**Gospel**

It's still sobering to read that after stilling a storm, exorcising a demoniac, healing a bleeding woman, raising a young girl to life, and teaching in the local synagogue – all of which cause awe, astonishment or amazement – Jesus is unable to work any miracle among his own. This time the shoe is on the other foot: Jesus himself is "amazed at their lack of faith".

Unbelief is a recurring theme in Mark's gospel. Here it is Jesus' townsfolk who wonder who he is. On the one hand they know him all too well, on the other they don't know him at all. For Mark, Jesus' true identity is the suffering and crucified messiah. In his gospel those who acclaim Jesus as the Son of God are not his family, friends or followers, but the demons he expels and the centurion who witnesses his death on the cross.

Two particular details of this gospel passage are worth noting. The first is that Jesus is identified, perhaps out of contempt, as "son of Mary" rather than "son of Joseph", and reference is made to his "brothers" and "sisters". There is still much dispute as to what these terms tell us about Jesus' family relationships. The second is that it's by the laying on of hands that Jesus cures a few of the sick. The touch of Jesus features repeatedly in the healing stories recorded by Mark.

## Concluding Prayer

### Solemn Blessing (Ordinary Time I)

May the Lord bless you and keep you.

**Amen.**

May he let his face shine upon you  
and show you his mercy.

**Amen.**

May he turn his countenance towards you  
and give you his 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 I, Roman Missal p. 714)