

SUNDAY READINGS

READ AT HOME

16th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Year A

19 July 2020



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

A strange feature of our time seems to be our capacity to operate with conflicting mindsets. On the one hand we demand scientific proof for truths before we will adopt them; we want empirical evidence to back up belief. On the other we are willing to entertain theories that appear fanciful and to accept marketing claims that have no basis in fact. Is there a wise way of discerning the truth so that we can live by it?

The parables that Jesus tells are neither scientific nor fanciful. They are stories that bear deep truths for those who engage with them imaginatively and who are prepared to make the choices they call for. Jesus invites us on a journey of discovery when he begins “the kingdom of heaven is like . . .”. No parable offers a logical or comprehensive description of the kingdom, but neither are we led astray into a world of fantasy. Jesus teases and challenges us to see the world in a different way – his way.

A reading from the book of Wisdom 12:13, 16–19

There is no god, other than you, who cares for everything,
to whom you might have to prove that you never judged unjustly.
Your justice has its source in strength,
your sovereignty over all makes you lenient to all.
You show your strength when your sovereign power is questioned
and you expose the insolence of those who know it;
but, disposing of such strength, you are mild in judgement,
you govern us with great lenience,
for you have only to will, and your power is there.
By acting thus you have taught a lesson to your people
how the virtuous man must be kindly to his fellow men,
and you have given your sons the good hope
that after sin you will grant repentance.

First Reading

In the pattern of readings for Ordinary Time the first reading is chosen because of a connection it has with the gospel. Usually this is obvious enough, sometimes less so. Occasionally it is quite obscure. This is the case today.

The reading from the book of Wisdom is taken from a section which seeks to justify the Israelite conquest of Canaan. This was – and remains to this day – a hotly debated issue. In Jewish tradition Israelite settlement in Canaan was accomplished by divine design and with divine assistance. This meant that if the takeover of the land could be considered unjust then God must be accused of the injustice.

In the passage that leads up to today's reading the author presents God with a defence. The destruction of the Canaanite nation was justified because they were murderous idolatrous sinners and deserved to be punished. The lectionary text includes none of this context so what we hear is puzzling. It becomes a detached tribute to God for the just and merciful exercise of his sovereign power.

All this, along with the style of the writing, makes this a difficult reading for the reader to proclaim and for the congregation to understand. But the fundamental message is that God is both merciful and just – and this is what the reader must endeavour to communicate.

Responsorial Psalm Ps 85:5–6, 9–10, 15–16

R. Lord, you are good and forgiving.
O Lord, you are good and forgiving,
full of love to all who call.
Give heed, O Lord, to my prayer
and attend to the sound of my voice. **R.**
All the nations shall come to adore you
and glorify your name, O Lord:
for you are great and do marvellous deeds,
you who alone are God. **R.**
But you, God of mercy and compassion,
slow to anger, O Lord,
abounding in love and truth,
turn and take pity on me. **R.**

Responsorial Psalm

The responsorial psalm reinforces the theme of the first reading and makes it more accessible. This is evident right from the moment the response is announced. Taken from the beginning of the first verse, it is clear and to the point: "Lord, you are good and forgiving".

This theme is taken up by the verses and amplified. The grateful recognition of the goodness and mercy of God gives the psalmist confidence to ask God for help. Thus we find a plea for assistance woven into the psalm. The reader will need to negotiate between the moods of the psalm as it shifts backwards and forwards between joyful praise and trusting petition.

A reading from the letter of St Paul to the Romans 8:26–27

The Spirit comes to help us in our weakness. For when we cannot choose words in order to pray properly, the Spirit himself expresses our plea in a way that could never be put into words, and God who knows everything in our hearts knows perfectly well what he means, and that the pleas of the saints expressed by the Spirit are according to the mind of God.

Second Reading

Our second excerpt from chapter 8 of Romans is quite short. It is an encouraging text for all who find prayer a challenge, and that is likely to include most of us at some time or other. Even great saints have gone for years without experiencing consolation in prayer. When we struggle to maintain a regular practice of prayer and are tempted to lose heart, Paul's words can give us the courage to stay steadfast.

The reading consists of two sentences, the first brief and direct, the second long and complex. For readers using the *Jerusalem Bible* lectionary it is the second that will present some difficulty. It would be a very useful exercise for readers to write it out in the format used in the NRSV. As usual the text has been set out there in short sense lines.

Close examination of the second sentence shows that it falls into three distinct parts.

The first takes us from the beginning of the sentence down to the phrase “. . . never be put into words”. This in turn has three components – an opening clause, the central statement (“the Spirit himself expresses our plea”), and an explanatory addition. Readers should ensure that they understand how this holds together and give clear emphasis to the central statement. A moment's pause will allow the congregation to take this in before the next point is made.

The second unit runs from “and God who knows . . .” down to “what he means”. This is virtually a separate sentence in its own right. A pause before delivering the final unit – “and that the pleas . . .” – will allow this further teaching to be heard and understood by all.

A reading from the holy Gospel according to Matthew

13:24–43

Jesus put a parable before the crowds, ‘The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a man who sowed good seed in his field. While everybody was asleep his enemy came, sowed darnel all among the wheat, and made off. When the new wheat sprouted and ripened, the darnel appeared as well. The owner's servants went to him and said, “Sir, was it not good seed that you sowed in your field? If so, where does the darnel come from?” “Some enemy has done this” he answered. And the servants said, “Do you want us to go and weed it out?” But he said, “No, because when you weed out the darnel you might pull up the wheat with it. Let them both grow till the harvest; and at harvest time I shall say to the reapers: First collect the darnel and tie it in bundles to be burnt, then gather the wheat into my barn.”’

Gospel

The structure of the gospel reading for today is the same as last week's. It begins with Jesus' teaching in parables, adds a comment on the purpose of parables, and finishes with an explanation of a parable. The difference this week is that the first section contains not one but three parables. The lectionary offers the option of a shorter version which consists only of the first parable. Once again it will be a pastoral decision as to which is the more fruitful option to take. One might regret that the shorter version did not extend to the extra two short parables. Each of the three parables differs in length and character. If the full version of the gospel is read, there should be a sufficient pause between the parables to allow each one to be fully appreciated.

[He put another parable before them, 'The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed which a man took and sowed in his field. It is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the biggest shrub of all and becomes a tree so that the birds of the air come and shelter in its branches.'

He told them another parable, 'The kingdom of heaven is like the yeast a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour till it was leavened all through.'

In all this Jesus spoke to the crowds in parables; indeed he would never speak to them except in parables. This was to fulfil the prophecy:

I will speak to you in parables
and expound things hidden since the foundation of
the world.

Then, leaving the crowds, he went to the house; and his disciples came to him and said, 'Explain the parable about the darnel in the field to us.' He said in reply, 'The sower of the good seed is the Son of Man. The field is the world; the good seed is the subjects of the kingdom; the darnel, the subjects of the evil one; the enemy who sowed them, the devil; the harvest is the end of the world; the reapers are the angels. Well then, just as the darnel is gathered up and burnt in the fire, so it will be at the end of time. The Son of Man will send his angels and they will gather out of his kingdom all things that provoke offences and all who do evil, and throw them into the blazing furnace, where there will be weeping and grinding of teeth. Then the virtuous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. Listen, anyone who has ears!']

[Short Form: omit text in brackets.]

There is an interesting difference between this and last Sunday's gospel. The section that deals with the purpose of the parables offers two contrasting perspectives. Last week's full text contained quite a lengthy passage arguing that the parables were designed to hide the truth; only the disciples were to be given access to the "mysteries of the kingdom". The corresponding section in today's reading is not only much shorter but suggests the exact opposite. Jesus quotes from Psalm 77/78 to say "I will . . . expound things hidden from the foundation of the world". These divergent points of view go to show that the gospel continually defies simplistic interpretation. The final section offers an allegorical explanation of the parable of the wheat and the darnel (or weeds).

Concluding Prayers

Almighty and all-merciful God,
lover of the human race, healer of all our wounds,
in whom there is no shadow of death,
save us in this time of crisis;
grant wisdom and courage to our leaders;
watch over all medical people
as they tend the sick and work for a cure;
stir in us a sense of solidarity beyond all isolation;
if our doors are closed, let our hearts be open.
By the power of your love destroy the virus of fear,
that hope may never die
and the light of Easter, the triumph of life,
may shine upon us and the whole world.
Through Jesus Christ, the Lord risen from the dead,
who lives and reigns for ever and ever.
Amen.

Holy Mary, health of the sick, pray for us.
St Joseph, guardian of us all, pray for us.

(Most Rev. Mark Coleridge, Archbishop of Brisbane)

or

Gracious God,
We give thanks anew for your providence and presence.
We prayerfully seek your grace, amidst COVID-19 here and overseas.
We pray for those in need of healing.
We pray for your peace with those who are anxious or grieving.
We pray you will continue to strengthen and sustain
all those who are serving in response.
We pray for your Holy Spirit's discernment
amidst the many choices and decisions
facing our national, community and medical leaders.
We pray we each might see quickly what more we can do
to help those who are vulnerable.
This prayer for our nation in the family of nations,
with all that is on our hearts,
we gather now and pray
through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.

(Ecumenical prayer from the National Council of Churches. We have been invited to pray this prayer at 7pm each day.)