

SUNDAY READINGS

READ AT HOME

17th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Year A

26 July 2020



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

Just what is the “kingdom of heaven”? There is no doubt that Jesus has a passion for the kingdom and he wants us to share it. The kingdom is a central feature in his mission of teaching and healing. But it remains elusive, even baffling, like the parables he tells that both hide and reveal.

Today Matthew brings Jesus’ Parable Sermon to a close with three more stories. Two of them call for decisive action while the third counsels patience. Faced with such different demands we might well pray as Solomon does for the gift of wisdom!

And if we feel both daunted and yet fascinated by the mystery of it all, Paul reassures us today that our lives are in good hands. God’s loving purposes will come to glorious fulfilment.

A reading from the first book of the Kings 3:5, 7–12

The Lord appeared to Solomon in a dream and said, 'Ask what you would like me to give you.' Solomon replied, 'Lord, my God, you have made your servant king in succession to David my father. But I am a very young man, unskilled in leadership. Your servant finds himself in the midst of this people of yours that you have chosen, a people so many its numbers cannot be counted or reckoned. Give your servant a heart to understand how to discern between good and evil, for who could govern this people of yours that is so great?' It pleased the Lord that Solomon should have asked for this. 'Since you have asked for this' the Lord said 'and not asked for long life for yourself or riches or the lives of your enemies, but have asked for a discerning judgement for yourself, here and now I do what you ask. I give you a heart wise and shrewd as none before you has had and none will have after you.'

Responsorial Psalm Ps 118:57, 72, 76–77, 127–130

R. Lord, I love your commands.
My part, I have resolved, O Lord,
is to obey your word.
The law from your mouth means more to me
than silver and gold. **R.**
Let your love be ready to console me
by your promise to your servant.
Let your love come to me and I shall live
for your law is my delight. **R.**
That is why I love your commands
more than finest gold.
That is why I rule my life by your precepts:
I hate false ways. **R.**
Your will is wonderful indeed;
therefore I obey it.
The unfolding of your word gives light
and teaches the simple. **R.**

First Reading

The wisdom of Solomon remains legendary. Countless generations have kept its memory alive in the very phrase "the wisdom of Solomon". The origin of his gift is explained in today's reading from the first book of Kings. It is said to have occurred in a dream. In ancient times dreams were often understood to be means of divine revelation. This tradition continued into New Testament times – witness the dreams that Joseph has about the birth of Jesus and those of Peter and Paul in the Acts of the Apostles.

In the dream Solomon and the Lord engage in dialogue. When invited to ask for a gift from God, Solomon requests "a heart to understand how to discern between good and evil". Because he has not asked for "long life for yourself or riches or the lives of your enemies", the Lord gives him "a heart wise and shrewd" like none before or after him.

As it stands the story is intended to confirm that Solomon's claim to kingship received divine endorsement. It also serves to depict his reign as fulfilling the ideals of the covenant. This is far from the whole story as the scriptures themselves make clear, but it is the theme of today's reading.

The reader has three voices to adopt: those of narrator (very briefly), Solomon and the Lord. Solomon should be heard as humble and respectful, the Lord as authoritative and generous in love.

Responsorial Psalm

The categorical nature of the response – "Lord, I love your commands" – may not immediately reflect the disposition of everyone in a contemporary congregation. On the face of it this is a counter-cultural declaration. Besides, it seems to take us a long way beyond the first reading's focus on wisdom. It needs to be prayed in the context of the psalm verses that follow.

They are taken from the longest psalm of all, Psalm 118/119. This is an extended meditation on the Law, which in today's selection of verses is also named as "word", "commands", "precepts" and "will". In Jewish tradition the Law was seen as God's gift; it defined Israel as a people and showed them the path of life. That is why the psalmist can describe it as worth "more than silver and gold"; it is his "delight".

If the response feels in any way problematic, it may be helpful to remember Jesus' words, "My food is to do the will of him who sent me", as well as our own constant repetition of "Thy will be done" in the Lord's Prayer.

A reading from the letter of St Paul to the Romans 8:28–30

We know that by turning everything to their good God co-operates with all those who love him, with all those that he has called according to his purpose. They are the ones he chose specially long ago and intended to become true images of his Son, so that his Son might be the eldest of many brothers. He called those he intended for this; those he called he justified, and with those he justified he shared his glory.

A reading from the holy Gospel according to Matthew 13:44–52

Jesus said to the crowds, 'The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field which someone has found; he hides it again, goes off happy, sells everything he owns and buys the field.

'Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls; when he finds one of great value he goes and sells everything he owns and buys it.

['Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a dragnet cast into the sea that brings in a haul of all kinds. When it is full, the fishermen haul it ashore; then, sitting down, they collect the good ones in a basket and throw away those that are no use. This is how it will be at the end of time: the angels will appear and separate the wicked from the just to throw them into the blazing furnace where there will be weeping and grinding of teeth.

'Have you understood all this?' They said 'Yes.' And he said to them, 'Well then, every scribe who becomes a disciple of the kingdom of heaven is like a householder who brings out from his storeroom things both new and old.'

[Short Form: omit text in brackets.]

Second Reading

Today's passage from Romans is short but concentrated. From early times it generated enormous theological controversy because of its reference to predestination. We are blessed in that nowadays there is much greater consensus across the Christian traditions on this divisive issue.

All the same the text isn't so simple to proclaim. Readers would do well to study it carefully and rehearse it out loud. If the *Jerusalem Bible* lectionary is being used, part of this preparation could be the exercise of writing out the text in sense lines like the NRSV.

Paul increases the tension as he goes, building his argument step by step until he reaches the climax of the final phrase: "with those he justified he shared his glory". Readers need to bring the congregation along with them as they proceed systematically through this reading. Paul is inviting his hearers to have confidence in God's loving purposes, no matter what. Our destiny is in God's good hands, and this is good news for all to hear.

Gospel

As on last Sunday the gospel reading contains a group of three parables. These, along with a short summation, conclude the discourse in Matthew's gospel specifically devoted to Jesus' teaching in parables.

The first two form a pair. Put simply, they liken the kingdom of heaven to a treasure that is worth risking everything to gain. However each of these two condensed stories has its own emphasis and invites its own insights. They take some unpacking. Together they throw down the gauntlet to the listener. They demand a radical reappraisal of what really matters, and decisive action to choose the one thing that does, the kingdom.

The third parable seems to be addressing a different issue. What should the faith community do about the mix of saints and sinners that it finds in its midst? Like last week's parable of the wheat and the weeds, the story seems to advise patience and trust. There does not need to be premature judgement or precipitate action to sort out the weeds from the wheat; this will be done by God at the end time.

The entire Parable Sermon is rounded out with a saying that might well describe Matthew's own understanding of his role as an evangelist – a scribe who brings things new and old out of his storehouse.

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.)