

SUNDAY READINGS

READ AT HOME

Palm Sunday
5 April 2020



Collect

Let us pray.

Almighty ever-living God,
who as an example of humility for the human race to follow
caused our Saviour to take flesh and submit to the Cross,
graciously grant that we may heed his lesson of patient suffering
and so merit a share in his Resurrection.

Who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, for ever and ever.

Amen.

Readings and Commentaries

The final Sunday of the Lenten season, as its rather lengthy title suggests, engages us in a full dress rehearsal for the liturgies of the great Three Days about to be celebrated: Holy Thursday, Good Friday, and the Easter Vigil.

Mass begins with a commemoration of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem. He arrives on a domestic animal, a donkey, not on a warlike horse, much less in a chariot. Though acclaimed enthusiastically with palm branches and hosannas, he comes in peace and subverts popular expectations of a political messiah.

The second highlight of today's liturgy is the proclamation of the Passion narrative. This year it's Matthew's account that we read. We already know that in a week's time we shall be celebrating resurrection. Hearing the full story of Jesus' suffering and death today cautions us not to try and get ahead of ourselves. We may be tempted to try and take a short cut to glory. Victory certainly beckons, but it will not be ours before we have accompanied Jesus on the way of the cross.

A reading from the prophet Isaiah

50:4-7

The Lord has given me
a disciple's tongue.
So that I may know how to reply
to the wearied
he provides me with speech.
Each morning he wakes me to hear,
to listen like a disciple.
The Lord has opened my ear.
For my part, I made no resistance,
neither did I turn away.
I offered my back to those who struck me,
my cheeks to those who tore at my beard;
I did not cover my face
against insult and spittle.
The Lord comes to my help,
so that I am untouched by the insults.
So, too, I set my face like flint;
I know I shall not be shamed.

First Reading

Readings from the prophet Isaiah feature throughout Holy Week. More exactly, what we hear are four passages from the book of the prophet Isaiah generally known as the "songs of the suffering servant".

The meaning of these texts is disputed, but their use in this week's liturgies invites us to read them in the light of Jesus' redemptive suffering. The figure of the servant is mysterious; it could be a person or it could be Israel as a people. The songs suggest that this servant has been chosen by God for a mission that will entail opposition and suffering but will bring vindication. Because the songs are quoted often in the gospel accounts of the passion, Christian readers cannot fail to be struck by the parallels with Jesus' experience of betrayal and suffering in the cause of right.

The text for today (proclaimed again on Wednesday) is the first part of the third servant song. Spoken in the first person, it depicts the experience of the servant. First of all the servant is a disciple, one who listens to the Lord and then speaks out what he has heard. As a result he meets with violent opposition but does not retaliate with violence. He puts his trust in the Lord. This is serious business. The text invites the reader to enter into the mind of the servant and to speak with his voice. The congregation needs to sense the servant's determination to remain steadfast in the face of hostile attacks. Readers should adopt a solemn, but not morbid, tone and proclaim the text at a measured pace.

Responsorial Psalm

Ps 21:8–9, 17–20, 23–24

R. My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?

All who see me deride me.
They curl their lips, they toss their heads.
'He trusted in the Lord, let him save him;
let him release him if this is his friend.' **R.**

Many dogs have surrounded me,
a band of the wicked beset me.
They tear holes in my hands and my feet.
I can count every one of my bones. **R.**

They divide my clothing among them.
They cast lots for my robe.
O Lord, do not leave me alone,
my strength, make haste to help me! **R.**

I will tell of your name to my brethren
and praise you where they are assembled.
'You who fear the Lord give him praise;
all sons of Jacob, give him glory.
Revere him, Israel's sons.' **R.**

A reading from the letter of St Paul to the Philippians

2:6–11

His state was divine,
yet Christ Jesus did not cling
to his equality with God
but emptied himself
to assume the condition of a slave,
and became as men are,
and being as all men are,
he was humbler yet,
even to accepting death,
death on a cross.
But God raised him high
and gave him the name
which is above all other names
so that all beings
in the heavens, on earth and in the underworld,
should bend the knee at the name of Jesus
and that every tongue should acclaim
Jesus Christ as Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.

Responsorial Psalm

The response to the psalm will resonate immediately with the congregation. As they hear it announced with due deliberation, they will recognise it as Jesus' cry on the cross. Long before that it was the arresting opening line of Psalm 21/22.

Taken on its own it sounds bleak, close to a howl of despair. That is certainly how the psalm begins. It continues with a litany of complaint and cries of anguish, alternating with the memory of trust in God. As the psalm progresses, confidence comes to the fore and allows praise and thanksgiving to prevail.

This transition from distress to praise is made clear – if rather abruptly – in the verses selected for today. The first three focus on the psalmist's sufferings, but the fourth is a burst of joyful praise. The reader will need to proclaim them accordingly – with pathos for the first three verses, and with joy for the fourth.

Second Reading

The reading from Paul's letter to the Philippians may have originated as an early Christian hymn. Whether this is the case or not, the text we have is a profound confession of faith whose meaning is inexhaustible.

Paul's use of the hymn is a prime example of what happens often in his letters. The practical problems that prompt him to write become a springboard for theological exploration. In this case the issue is division and dissension in the Christian community. Paul appeals to the Philippians to be "in full accord and of one mind" and to "let that same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus". This inspires him to quote the hymn we read today. All this is worth checking out by turning to the scriptures and finding chapter two of the letter.

The reading is a poetic gem that sums up the entire mystery that we are about to celebrate, the mystery of Jesus' incarnation, suffering, death, resurrection and exaltation. Because every phrase is laden with meaning it needs to be proclaimed slowly, deliberately and with great conviction. This is our faith!

Readers will note that the NRSV offers the text in inclusive language.

The passion of our Lord Jesus Christ according to Matthew

26:11–54 (Short Form)

Jesus was brought before Pontius Pilate, the governor, and the governor put to him this question, 'Are you the king of the Jews?' Jesus replied, 'It is you who say it.' But when he was accused by the chief priests and the elders he refused to answer at all. Pilate then said to him, 'Do you not hear how many charges they have brought against you?' But to the governor's complete amazement, he offered no reply to any of the charges.

At festival time it was the governor's practice to release a prisoner for the people, anyone they chose. Now there was at that time a notorious prisoner whose name was Barabbas. So when the crowd gathered, Pilate said to them, 'Which do you want me to release for you: Barabbas, or Jesus who is called Christ?' For Pilate knew it was out of jealousy that they had handed him over.

Now as he was seated in the chair of judgment, his wife sent him a message, 'Have nothing to do with that man; I have been upset all day by a dream I had about him.'

The chief priests and the elders, however, had persuaded the crowd to demand the release of Barabbas and the execution of Jesus. So when the governor spoke and asked them, 'Which of the two do you want me to release for you?' they said 'Barabbas'. 'But in that case,' Pilate said to them 'what am I to do with Jesus who is called Christ?' They all said, 'Let him be crucified!' 'Why?' he asked 'What harm has he done?' But they shouted all the louder, 'Let him be crucified!' Then Pilate saw that he was making no impression, that in fact a riot was imminent. So he took some water, washed his hands in front of the crowd and said, 'I am innocent of this man's blood. It is your concern.' And the people, to a man, shouted back, 'His blood be on us and on our children!' Then he released Barabbas for them. He ordered Jesus to be first scourged and then handed over to be crucified.

Gospel

Every year on this Sunday the story of Jesus' betrayal, passion and death is told at length. The reading is taken in turn from one of the synoptic gospels – Matthew, Mark or Luke – because we always read John's account on Good Friday. This year we read from Matthew.

No two versions of the passion narrative are the same. They have much in common but differ in the detail. It is helpful to think of each evangelist as an artist painting a portrait. Portrait painters are creative artists that are not satisfied with presenting a surface likeness; they seek to uncover a deeper truth. What they produce will appear very different, even if the subject is the same.

The gospel of Matthew is one of the most Jewish works in the New Testament. He is concerned to present Jesus as the Messiah who fulfils Israel's deepest longings and hopes while, at the same time, confounding those expectations. For Matthew Jesus is son of David, son of God. This perspective colours the way he tells the story of Jesus' last earthly hours.

Reading this long text – even in its abridged form – poses great challenges. If proclaimed by one person alone, the challenge is to hold everyone's attention from start to finish. If proclaimed by several voices, it needs to be rehearsed thoroughly to ensure that each voice is up to the task and that all the transitions between speakers are made smoothly. This is especially difficult if the congregation is provided with texts that give them the role of the crowd. In any case there is a serious question about the value of having the congregation read the story instead of listening to it attentively.

Gospel Reading Continued...

The governor's soldiers took Jesus with them into the Praetorium and collected the whole cohort round him. Then they stripped him and made him wear a scarlet cloak, and having twisted some thorns into a crown they put this on his head and placed a reed in his right hand. To make fun of him they knelt to him saying, 'Hail, king of the Jews!' And they spat on him and took the reed and struck him on the head with it. And when they had finished making fun of him, they took off the cloak and dressed him in his own clothes and led him away to crucify him.

On their way out, they came across a man from Cyrene, Simon by name, and enlisted him to carry his cross. When they had reached a place called Golgotha, that is, the place of the skull, they gave him wine to drink mixed with gall, which he tasted but refused to drink. When they had finished crucifying him they shared out his clothing by casting lots, and then sat down and stayed there keeping guard over him.

Above his head was placed the charge against him: it read: 'This is Jesus, the King of the Jews.' At the same time two robbers were crucified with him, one on the right and one on the left.

The passers-by jeered at him; they shook their heads and said 'So you would destroy the Temple and rebuild it in three days! Then save yourself! If you are God's son, come down from the cross!' The chief priests with the scribes and elders mocked him in the same way. 'He saved others,' they said 'he cannot save himself. He is the king of Israel; let him come down from the cross now, and we will believe in him. He put his trust in God; now let God rescue him if he wants him. For he did say, "I am the son of God."' Even the robbers who were crucified with him taunted him in the same way.

From the sixth hour there was darkness over all the land until the ninth hour. And about the ninth hour, Jesus cried out in a loud voice, 'Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani!' that is, 'My God, my God, why have you deserted me!' When some of those who stood there heard this, they said, 'The man is calling on Elijah,' and one of them quickly ran to get a sponge which he dipped in vinegar and putting it on a reed, gave it to him to drink. 'Wait!' said the rest of them 'and see if Elijah will come to save him.' But Jesus again crying out in a loud voice, yielded up his spirit.

(All kneel and pause a moment.)

At that, the veil of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom; the earth quaked; the rocks were split; the tombs opened and the bodies of many holy men rose from the dead, and these, after his resurrection, came out of the tombs, entered the Holy City and appeared to a number of people. Meanwhile the centurion, together with the others guarding Jesus, had seen the earthquake and all that was taking place, and they were terrified and said, 'In truth this was a son of God.'

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.)