

SUNDAY READINGS

READ AT HOME

Second Sunday in Ordinary Time

Year B

17 January 2021



Collect

Almighty ever-living God,
who govern all things,
both in heaven and on earth,
mercifully hear the pleading of your people
and bestow your peace on our times.
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

Our primary guide through the two parts of this year's Ordinary Time is the gospel writer Mark. Jesus' first words in Mark make it clear that from now on time can never be considered "ordinary": "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news," said Jesus (1:14). Every Sunday – indeed every day – is a "day of salvation" (2 Cor 6:2).

Because Mark's is the shortest gospel we read supplementary material from the gospel of John on three occasions – on this Sunday, on Sundays 17-21, and on the last Sunday of the year, the feast of Christ the King. On the Sundays of Ordinary Time we hear an Old Testament reading (accompanied by a psalm) that in some way relates to the gospel. This year the independent second reading will come from the apostle Paul's letters to the Corinthians and to the Ephesians, from James the apostle, and from the unknown author of the letter to the Hebrews. A rich feast of the word of God lies before us.

A reading from the first book of Samuel 3:3–10, 19

Samuel was lying in the sanctuary of the Lord where the ark of God was, when the Lord called, 'Samuel! Samuel!' He answered, 'Here I am.' Then he ran to Eli and said, 'Here I am, since you called me'. Eli said, 'I did not call. Go back and lie down.' So he went and lay down. Once again the Lord called, 'Samuel! Samuel!' Samuel got up and went to Eli and said. 'Here I am, since you called me.' He replied, 'I did not call you, my son; go back and lie down.' Samuel had as yet no knowledge of the Lord and the word of the Lord had not yet been revealed to him. Once again the Lord called, the third time. He got up and went to Eli and said, 'Here I am, since you called me.' Eli then understood that it was the Lord who was calling the boy, and he said to Samuel, 'Go and lie down, and if someone calls say, "Speak Lord, your servant is listening"'. So Samuel went and lay down in his place.

The Lord then came and stood by, calling as he had done before, 'Samuel! Samuel!' Samuel answered, 'Speak, Lord, your servant is listening.'

Samuel grew up and the Lord was with him and let no word of his fall to the ground.

First Reading

The season of Ordinary Time gets under way with an ancient story from the first book of Samuel. The setting is the shrine at Shiloh, one of the holy places pre-dating the temple in Jerusalem. Samuel is a young boy given over to the service of the priest Eli by his mother Hannah. Her desperate plea for a child had borne fruit in Samuel and prompted her to thank God in a prayer that anticipates Mary's Magnificat (1 Sam 2:1-10).

The story that we hear today is told to establish Samuel's authority as a prophet. It plays on Samuel's mistaken impression that it is Eli's voice he is hearing. The drama builds up as Samuel wakes Eli three times in succession before the priest realises it is the Lord's voice that is disturbing Samuel's rest. On the fourth occasion Samuel responds with words that have echoed down the ages, "Speak, Lord, your servant is listening". The reading omits the next eight verses and finishes with a clear affirmation of Samuel's status as a prophet of the Lord.

The unfolding of the story by means of the various dialogues gives the reader an opportunity to engage the congregation in the dramatic tension. Whose is this mysterious voice? The question is not answered until late in the passage. The challenge for the reader is to proclaim the text with the right degree of energy – neither too much nor too little. The high point is reached just before the end with Samuel's reply to the Lord. This is what the congregation needs to hear and understand. It should be followed by a brief pause before the reader proceeds with the concluding summary statement.

This tale of attentive listening to the Lord paves the way for the gospel story of how the first disciples of Jesus heard about him and came to follow him.

Responsorial Psalm Ps 39:2, 4, 7–10

R. Here am I, Lord;
I come to do your will.

I waited, I waited for the Lord
and he stooped down to me;
he heard my cry.
He put a new song into my mouth,
praise of our God. R.

You do not ask for sacrifice and offerings,
but an open ear.

You do not ask for holocaust and victim.
Instead, here am I. R.

In the scroll of the book it stands written
that I should do your will.

My God, I delight in your law
in the depth of my heart. R.

Your justice I have proclaimed
in the great assembly.

My lips I have not sealed;
you know it, O Lord. R.

Responsorial Psalm

The verses selected from Psalm 39/40 connect very directly with the first reading. The response – "Here am I, Lord; I come to do your will" – immediately echoes Samuel's reply to the Lord. Readers and listeners familiar with the letter to the Hebrews will be reminded that a section of today's psalm is quoted there (see 10:5-9). Both Old and New Testaments agree that the essence of sacrifice is not the killing and offering of animals but a life of loving obedience to the word of God.

The psalm as a whole is a prayer of thanksgiving offered by one who has been delivered from some form of unnamed distress. Both the response and the body of the psalm are in the first person. The first verse is a short preface outlining the psalmist's experience; the remaining verses are a prayer addressed to God. The reader's task is to proclaim the psalm in such a way that each member of the congregation will be moved to pray with the psalmist and renew their dedication to God's loving purposes.

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

6:13–15, 17–20

The body is not meant for fornication; it is for the Lord, and the Lord for the body. God who raised the Lord from the dead, will by his power raise us up too.

You know, surely, that your bodies are members making up the body of Christ; anyone who is joined to the Lord is one spirit with him.

Keep away from fornication. All the other sins are committed outside the body; but to fornicate is to sin against your own body. Your body, you know, is the temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you since you received him from God. You are not your own property; you have been bought and paid for. That is why you should use your body for the glory of God.

Second Reading

It is worth repeating that in Ordinary Time the second reading has no necessary connection with the other readings. The first reading, psalm, acclamation and gospel are all explicitly inter-related, but the second reading operates independently. Its purpose is to give us a succession of key passages from the letters of the New Testament.

Today's text is the first of five extracts from the middle section (Chapters 6–11) of Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. In Year A we read from Chapters 1–4; in Year C we'll read from Chapters 12–15. For three Sundays we hear some of Paul's teaching on sexual behaviour and relationships, then an assertive account of his mission of preaching, before the series concludes with Paul's appeal that the Corinthians take him as a model. Paul's teaching on the Lord's Supper in Chapter 11 is omitted, presumably because it is used in part on Holy Thursday.

The reading begins abruptly with a denunciation of fornication. This is sure to sound shocking after the engaging tone of the first reading and psalm. To hammer home the point, the denunciation is repeated shortly after. These curt condemnations may capture such attention that Paul's positive teaching is lost sight of. This is especially so as Paul does not present his case in a coherent order.

Yet the issues are fundamental. Paul is affirming our flesh-and-spirit humanity, redemption and resurrection, union with Christ, and life in the Spirit. The reader's task is to ensure that in the cascade of Paul's thoughts these profoundly positive insights are given enough weight for the congregation to hear them. The language may be simple and the phrases short, but this is a challenging reading to proclaim. It will take careful preparation.

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

1:35–42

As John stood with two of his disciples, Jesus passed, and John stared hard at him and said, 'Look, there is the lamb of God.' Hearing this, the two disciples followed Jesus. Jesus turned round, saw them following and said, 'What do you want?' They answered, 'Rabbi,' - which means Teacher - 'where do you live?' 'Come and see' he replied; so they went and saw where he lived, and stayed with him the rest of that day. It was about the tenth hour.

One of these two who became followers of Jesus after hearing what John had said was Andrew, the brother of Simon Peter. Early next morning, Andrew met his brother and said to him, 'We have found the Messiah' - which means the Christ - and he took Simon to Jesus. Jesus looked hard at him and said, 'You are Simon son of John; you are to be called Cephas' - meaning Rock.

Gospel

Today's gospel is the first of the passages from John that are used to supplement Mark's short gospel. As with the majority of gospel readings, we hear this text only once in the three-year cycle. It links with last Sunday's gospel for the baptism of Jesus via the figure of John the Baptist. He is the stepping stone to Jesus' call of the first disciples, an episode which John describes quite differently from the other gospel writers.

The very first words spoken by Jesus in the fourth gospel are telling. He asks the disciples, "What do you want?". His response to their answer is equally simple and profound, "Come and see". And, John reports, "they went . . . and stayed with him". In these few words John has defined the role of the disciple. The theme of abiding with Jesus and of the divine presence abiding with us recurs insistently later in the gospel.

The reading is punctuated with names and titles. Jesus is variously named as "lamb of God", "Rabbi/Teacher", and "Messiah/Christ". Right from the outset and throughout this gospel, the issue of Jesus' true identity is a constant question. For his part Simon Peter is given a new name and thus a new role as "Cephas/Rock"; the gospel will conclude with a fresh commission to him to shepherd the flock of Christ.

Concluding Prayer

Blessing for the Beginning of the New Year

May God, the source and origin of all blessing,
grant us grace,
pour out his blessing in abundance,
and keep us safe from harm throughout the year.

Amen.

May he give us integrity in the faith,
endurance in hope,
and perseverance in charity
with holy patience to the end.

Amen.

May he order our days and our deeds in his peace,
grant our prayers in this and in every place,
and lead us 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 the Beginning of the Year, Roman Missal p 710)