

SUNDAY READINGS

READ AT HOME

19th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Year A

9 August 2020



Collect

Almighty ever-living God,
whom, taught by the Holy Spirit,
we dare to call our Father,
bring, we pray, to perfection in our hearts
the spirit of adoption as your sons and daughters,
that we may merit to enter into the inheritance
which you have promised.
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

There's no limit to the ways in which human beings encounter the divine. Our experience of God's presence and power is infinitely varied. It can happen in a dramatically impressive event; it can happen in a moment of utter quiet. In the end it is not something under our control. The initiative is always God's. Often enough it occurs precisely when we have lost control of our lives, when our defences are down and we are aware of our human frailty. Our vulnerability allows God to reach into our lives and touch us.

As we hear today such was the case both for the prophet Elijah and for Jesus' disciples. Elijah was on the run for fear of his life; Peter and the other disciples were terrified they would drown. Elijah encounters God in a mysterious silence, Peter and the others in Jesus' power over the forces of nature. In whatever way we sense the divine presence in our lives, we are invited to hear the reassuring words, "Courage! It is I! Do not be afraid".

A reading from the first book of the Kings

19:9, 11–1

When Elijah reached Horeb, the mountain of God, he went into the cave and spent the night in it. Then he was told, 'Go out and stand on the mountain before the Lord.' Then the Lord himself went by. There came a mighty wind, so strong it tore the mountains and shattered the rocks before the Lord. But the Lord was not in the wind. After the wind came an earthquake. But the Lord was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake came a fire. But the Lord was not in the fire. And after the fire there came the sound of a gentle breeze. And when Elijah heard this, he covered his face with his cloak and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave.

First Reading

The stories about the prophet Elijah in the books of 1 and 2 Kings are colourful and stirring. They make great reading. In this case the whole of chapter 19 in 1 Kings is worth a good look. It tells us that Elijah is fleeing for his life from the vengeful Jezebel, wife of King Ahab. Ironically he reverses the path taken by the Israelites on their exodus from Egypt. After a journey of forty days and forty nights (a deeply symbolic span of time) he finally arrives at Mount Sinai, the holy mountain where the Mosaic covenant had been sealed.

This is where today's reading starts. Unfortunately it then omits verse 10. This seems a great pity because it provides valuable context for the story. Elijah witnesses a display of nature's forces: wind, earthquake and fire. In the Old Testament these are often signs of God's self-manifestation, but not here. The Lord is not present in any of these.

They are followed by "the sound of a gentle breeze" (or more poetically in the NRSV, "a sound of sheer silence"). Intriguingly we are not told whether the Lord was or was not present in the silence. The reading finishes here, leaving us in suspense. It does not tell us that the silence is followed by a dialogue between Elijah and the Lord.

The reader should ensure that the congregation is drawn into the developing drama of the story. A moment's pause before and after the key sentence, "And after the fire there came the sound of a gentle breeze", will allow everyone to sense the mystery this is meant to suggest.

Responsorial Psalm

Ps 84:9–14

R. Lord, show us your mercy and love,
and grant us your salvation.

I will hear what the Lord God has to say,
a voice that speaks of peace.

His help is near for those who fear him
and his glory will dwell in our land. **R.**

Mercy and faithfulness have met;
justice and peace have embraced.
Faithfulness shall spring from the earth
and justice look down from heaven. **R.**

The Lord will make us prosper
and our earth shall yield its fruit.
Justice shall march before him
and peace shall follow his steps. **R.**

Responsorial Psalm

Psalm 84/85 is a prayer from a people in some kind of difficulty. They ask that God will come to their aid as he did in the past. This is implied in the response which is taken from the psalm. As usual with a two line response, readers will need to give clear vocal and visual cues to enable the congregation to respond at the end, not half way through.

The first verse seems to echo Elijah's experience of God on the holy mountain: "I will hear what the Lord God has to say . . .". The promise of peace and help was what he needed when he was at the end of his tether.

More broadly, Elijah's mission was to rail against the rampant injustice and idolatry of his time. The psalm verses go on to affirm the genuinely divine blessings of "mercy and faithfulness" and "justice and peace". In the tradition of Hebrew poetry these terms are repeated in parallel forms.

The tone of the psalm which the reader should convey is one of confident trust.

A reading from the letter of St Paul to the Romans **9:1–5**

What I want to say is no pretence; I say it in union with Christ – it is the truth – my conscience in union with the Holy Spirit assures me of it too. What I want to say is this: my sorrow is so great, my mental anguish so endless, I would willingly be condemned and be cut off from Christ if it could help my brothers of Israel, my own flesh and blood. They were adopted as sons, they were given the glory and the covenants; the Law and the ritual were drawn up for them, and the promises were made to them. They are descended from the patriarchs and from their flesh and blood came Christ who is above all, God for ever blessed! Amen.

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

14:22–33

Jesus made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side while he would send the crowds away. After sending the crowds away he went up into the hills by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, while the boat, by now far out on the lake, was battling with a heavy sea, for there was a head-wind. In the fourth watch of the night he went towards them, walking on the lake, and when the disciples saw him walking on the lake they were terrified. 'It is a ghost' they said, and cried out in fear. But at once Jesus called out to them, saying 'Courage! It is I! Do not be afraid.' It was Peter who answered. 'Lord', he said 'if it is you, tell me to come to you across the water.' 'Come' said Jesus. Then Peter got out of the boat and started walking towards Jesus across the water, but as soon as he felt the force of the wind, he took fright and began to sink. 'Lord! Save me!' he cried. Jesus put out his hand at once and held him. 'Man of little faith,' he said 'why did you doubt?' And as they got into the boat the wind dropped. The men in the boat bowed down before him and said, 'Truly, you are the Son of God.'

Second Reading

Today's second reading is the first of three extracts from chapters 9 – 11 of Romans. These three chapters form an extended unit in which Paul agonises over the question of God's faithfulness to Israel. If salvation is God's free gift to all people by the grace of Christ, what does this mean for Paul's own people, the people of the covenant and the Law? Has the God who pledged eternal covenant love to Israel now proved unfaithful? Has God abandoned his own people?

What we hear is the introduction to this prolonged debate. It is filled with intense feeling. The Israelites are Paul's own people (see Philippians 3:4–6) and he is deeply distressed about their fate. He compiles a litany of the gifts God gave them: the covenants, the Law, the ritual, the promises, the patriarchs. Finally he exclaims that they are the forebears of Christ himself. The key problem for the reader is that the congregation is unlikely to be aware of the issue that is preoccupying Paul so much. The cause of Paul's "sorrow" and "anguish" is not alluded to until half-way through the reading. Listeners may be perplexed as to what Paul is talking about until (if they are listening very carefully) they hear him say: "if it could help my brothers of Israel, my own flesh and blood" (in the NRSV, "my kindred according to the flesh"). Even this is only a passing hint.

Readers do not have the opportunity to put a reading in context. What they can do is ensure they themselves understand what is being said and deliver the contents as faithfully as they can. This means communicating the depth of Paul's feelings to start with, then giving due emphasis to the clause that sheds some light on the cause of his distress. The list of Israel's privileged gifts should be read with strength; it comes to a climax with Paul's final burst of prayer.

Gospel

The gospel story contains a succession of episodes: Jesus' prayer, his appearance on the lake, his challenge to Peter, and the disciples' confession of faith.

The text follows directly on from last Sunday's story of the feeding of the crowd. Matthew reminds us of Jesus' practice of prayer, often alone and through the night. He implies a connection between Jesus' solitary communing with God and the divine power with which he masters the storm-tossed sea.

The evangelists make no bones about the frailty of the disciples' faith; stories of this kind are to be found throughout the gospels. The appearance of Jesus only terrifies them further. His reassuring words to them – "Courage! It is I! Do not be afraid" – invite them to identify him with the God whom Moses encountered mysteriously on the holy mountain (Exodus 3:14). Peter, as impulsive as ever, throws caution to the wind and heads toward Jesus, only to sink in doubt. In this Peter plays a representative role; he stands for all the disciples. Jesus' rebuke – "Man of little faith, why did you doubt?" (in the NRSV, "you of little faith") – is a hint of the denials that are to come. The whole reading challenges the church to come to robust faith in the 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.)