

SUNDAY READINGS

READ AT HOME

21st Sunday in Ordinary Time

Year A

23 August 2020



Collect

O God, who cause the minds of the faithful
to unite in a single purpose,
grant your people to love what you command
and to desire what you promise,
that, amid the uncertainties of this world,
our hearts may be fixed on that place
where true gladness is found.
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

The innocent question Jesus puts to his disciples, “Who do people say the Son of Man is?” quickly becomes personal: “But you, who do you say I am?” It’s a question that has haunted every generation, and it bothers us still. It’s a question that we want to shy away from and yet find alluring; it both threatens and promises.

Our lesser self is threatened by the decision it demands of us. We sense that we are being asked for a commitment. Our settled ways are in jeopardy. We might have to re-evaluate our beliefs and behaviours. We suspect that we may be called to let go of familiar things and venture into unknown territory.

For all that, the question attracts us. It has an air of adventure about it, the promise of discovery. That promise centres on the person of Jesus. We are drawn to him. We find him endlessly fascinating. Our better selves know that we will find his company exhilarating. With him we discover the depths of our humanity, in him we see the face of God.

A reading from the prophet Isaiah 22:19–23

Thus says the Lord of hosts to Shebna, the master of the palace:

I dismiss you from your office,
I remove you from your post,
and the same day I call on my servant
Eliakim son of Hilkiah.
I invest him with your robe,
gird him with your sash,
entrust him with your authority;
and he shall be a father
to the inhabitants of Jerusalem
and to the House of Judah.
I place the key of the House of David
on his shoulder;
should he open, no one shall close,
should he close, no one shall open.
I drive him like a peg
into a firm place;
he will become a throne of glory
for his father's house.

Responsorial Psalm Ps 137:1–3, 6, 8

R. Lord, your love is eternal;
do not forsake the work of your hands.
I thank you, Lord, with all my heart,
you have heard the words of my mouth.
Before the angels I will bless you,
I will adore before your holy temple. **R.**
I thank you for your faithfulness and love
which excel all we ever knew of you.
On the day I called, you answered;
you increased the strength of my soul. **R.**
The Lord is high yet he looks on the lowly
and the haughty he knows from afar.
Your love, O Lord, is eternal,
discard not the work of your hands. **R.**

First Reading

On the face of it this reading has no obvious relationship with the gospel story. In somewhat opaque poetic language, it recounts the sacking of Shebna as master of the king's palace. He is replaced by Eliakim who is later overwhelmed by the responsibility. All this takes place in the reign of King Hezekiah, several hundred years before the birth of Christ.

There is a verbal link between this and the gospel which may account for its selection. Speaking through the prophet, the Lord says that he will "place the key of the house of David on his shoulder; should he open, no one shall close, should he close, no one shall open". This has clear parallels with what Jesus says to Peter: "I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth shall be considered bound in heaven; whatever you loose on earth shall be considered loosed in heaven".

Perhaps we might even imagine a link between Eliakim's failure in the job entrusted to him and Peter's subsequent denials of Jesus. How justified we would be in doing this is open to question.

The reading as such poses no great difficulty, other than the pronunciation of the names of Shebna, Eliakim, and Hilkiah. Unless the congregation picks up the link word "key" and connects the associated section with the gospel, they are likely to remain puzzled by this text, no matter how well proclaimed.

Responsorial Psalm

Even the connection between the first reading and the psalm is not specific. Psalm 137/138 is a prayer of thanksgiving for deliverance, as is hinted in the second verse, "On the day I called, you answered". The prevailing mood of the verses selected is one of thankfulness, even though they finish with the plea, "discard not the work of your hands".

This combination of appreciation and petition is made explicit in the response. Since this is not such a commonly used response, the reader needs to assume that the congregation is not familiar with it. There is the added difficulty of it being rather long, and in two lines. In this, as in other similar cases, readers need to articulate the response very clearly and come to the end of the first line with an upward intonation so that the ensuing brief pause does not cue the congregation in too soon. A downward intonation and a glance at the assembly will bring them in at the end of the whole response. The reader may need to be ready to repeat the response with the congregation.

A reading from the letter of St Paul to the Romans
11:33–36

How rich are the depths of God – how deep his wisdom and knowledge – and how impossible to penetrate his motives or understand his methods! Who could ever know the mind of the Lord? Who could ever be his counsellor? Who could ever give him anything or lend him anything? All that exists comes from him; all is by him and for him. To him be glory for ever! Amen.

A reading from the holy Gospel
according to Matthew **16:13–20**

When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi he put this question to his disciples, ‘Who do people say the Son of Man is?’ And they said, ‘Some say he is John the Baptist, some Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.’ ‘But you,’ he said, ‘who do you say I am?’ Then Simon Peter spoke up, ‘You are the Christ,’ he said, ‘the Son of the living God.’ Jesus replied, ‘Simon son of Jonah, you are a happy man! Because it was not flesh and blood that revealed this to you but my Father in heaven. So I now say to you: You are Peter and on this rock I will build my Church. And the gates of the underworld can never hold out against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth shall be considered bound in heaven; whatever you loose on earth shall be considered loosed in heaven.’ Then he gave the disciples strict orders not to tell anyone that he was the Christ.

Second Reading

Paul’s long debate about the fate of Israel through chapters 9 – 11 comes to a close with a short burst of prayer. In phrases that bring the book of Job to mind Paul acclaim God’s mysterious and inscrutable ways. For all the effort he has put in to finding a definitive answer to his question, Paul is finally forced to admit there isn’t one.

Yet far from lamenting his defeat Paul is moved to exclamations of admiration and praise. At the heart of his prayer is the faith conviction that everything lies in God’s hands. Without saying it in so many words, Paul is declaring that these hands are trustworthy. Therefore, “To him be glory for ever! Amen.”

This brief text should be delivered with a sense of wonder and approval. A brief pause at the end of the third question will allow the congregation to hear Paul’s final confession of faith, and to echo his “Amen” in their hearts.

Gospel

The gospel text is identical to that for the feast of Saints Peter and Paul, except for the additional verse at the end.

The reading records Simon Peter’s profession of faith in Jesus as “the Christ, the Son of the living God”. In response Jesus affirms and commissions Peter: “You are Peter and on this rock I will build my Church”. As we’ll hear next Sunday, in the passage that follows on directly from this exchange, the gospel writer Matthew counterbalances the image of foundation stone with that of stumbling block.

As it stands the passage that we hear is prone to a one-sided interpretation in support of Petrine authority in the Church. This will make much of the divine authority entrusted to Peter and/or to the Church: “I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven.” Next Sunday’s gospel and other stories shed a different light on Peter. They reveal him as a flawed leader. Only two Sundays ago we heard how his faith failed as he tried to walk to Jesus across the water.

But today the focus is on Peter’s faith, his courage, his foundational role in the Church, and the assurance that the Church will never finally fail. Exactly what is meant by the power to bind and loose remains a matter for discussion within and across the Christian traditions. The gospel ends with one of Jesus’ calls to silence lest his Messiahship be misunderstood.

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.)