

SUNDAY READINGS

READ AT HOME

Third Sunday in Ordinary Time

Year A

22 January 2023



Collect

Almighty ever-living God,
direct our actions according to your good pleasure,
that in the name of your beloved Son
we may abound in good works.
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

“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is close at hand”. Matthew alone has both the Baptist and Jesus use this same stirring formula. While this forges a link between the Messiah and his herald, there are striking contrasts between each one’s use of this message. The Baptist proclaims fiery judgement, Jesus announces an era of healing and mercy. The dichotomy is sufficient to make the imprisoned forerunner wonder later on whether Jesus really was the Messiah he expected (see Mt 11:2-5).

But we should not overplay the difference. Soon we’ll be hearing Jesus making severe demands of his followers in the Sermon on the Mount. And as the hour of his betrayal approaches, his warnings become as apocalyptic as John’s.

The call to “metanoia,” to whole-hearted conversion and renewal, may sometimes strike us as a threat, sometimes as a promise. What matters is to not turn a deaf ear or close our hearts.

A reading from the prophet Isaiah 8:23 – 9:3

In days past the Lord humbled the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in days to come he will confer glory on the Way of the Sea on the far side of Jordan, province of the nations.

The people that walked in darkness
has seen a great light;
on those who live in a land of deep shadow
a light has shone.

You have made their gladness greater,
you have made their joy increase;
they rejoice in your presence
as men rejoice at harvest time,
as men are happy when they are dividing the
spoils.

For the yoke that was weighing on him,
the bar across his shoulders,
the rod of his oppressor,
these you break as on the day of Midian.

First Reading

The historical origins of this oracle of the prophet Isaiah are unclear, but here it is linked to the expansion of the Assyrian empire around the year 730 BC when Israel's northern provinces, Zebulun and Naphtali, were overrun. This disaster, the prophet announces, has been reversed. Light has dispelled the darkness and deep shadow of foreign dominion. The yoke, rod and bar of the oppressor have been broken. Gladness and joy abound as when there is a harvest or booty to share.

There's no mistaking the jubilant spirit of this text, even if it may not have as much dramatic impact as when it's proclaimed (with additional verses) at the Midnight Mass of Christmas. It's cited to good effect in today's gospel. Assuming that the assembly is unfamiliar with the historical references in the opening verse, readers will need to proclaim it with a strong sense of its importance. It serves as a kind of drum roll to get everyone's attention before the wonderful good news is heralded: "The people that walked in darkness has seen a great light".

The rest of the reading unpacks this powerful image. The challenge for readers is to maintain the heightened emotion through to the end. Once they have checked the pronunciation of the proper names, they have every reason to enjoy proclaiming this text. As usual, the NRSV employs inclusive language.

Responsorial Psalm Ps 26:1, 4, 13–14

R. The Lord is my light and my salvation.

The Lord is my light and my help;
whom shall I fear?

The Lord is the stronghold of my life;
before whom shall I shrink? **R.**

There is one thing I ask of the Lord,
for this I long,
to live in the house of the Lord,
all the days of my life,
to savour the sweetness of the Lord,
to behold his temple. **R.**

I am sure I shall see the Lord's goodness
in the land of the living.

Hope in him, hold firm and take heart.

Hope in the Lord! **R.**

Responsorial Psalm

The broad horizons of the first reading, celebrating the nation's liberation from imperial domination, are significantly narrowed in the responsorial psalm. The shift from community to individual is akin to replacing a wide-angle with a portrait lens. Though the image of light is common to both, Psalm 26/27 is an intensely personal prayer focussed on the psalmist's relationship with God and on the temple as the locus of the divine presence.

The opening line of the psalm provides the response. The three stanzas of the responsorial psalm come from the beginning, the body and the end of the psalm respectively. The stanza hints at difficult circumstances confronting the psalmist, but whatever is sparking fear and alarm is more than matched by the Lord who is light and help and stronghold. The second stanza expresses the psalmist's heartfelt desire to abide lovingly in God's presence. The third is the confident declaration of faith with which the whole psalm concludes.

This is a beautiful prayer for readers to lead. As is often the case, they need to be attentive to two things. The first is to respect each line as a unit in its own right, even the very short ones. The second is to take care with visual and vocal cues so as not to prompt the assembly to respond prematurely after the fourth line of the second stanza.

**A reading from the first letter of St Paul
to the Corinthians 1:10–13, 17**

I appeal to you, brothers, for the sake of our Lord Jesus Christ, to make up the differences between you, and instead of disagreeing among yourselves, to be united again in your belief and practice. From what Chloe's people have been telling me, my dear brothers, it is clear that there are serious differences among you. What I mean are all these slogans that you have, like: 'I am for Paul', 'I am for Apollo', 'I am for Cephas', 'I am for Christ'. Has Christ been parcelled out? Was it Paul that was crucified for you? Were you baptised in the name of Paul?

For Christ did not send me to baptise, but to preach the Good News, and not to preach that in the terms of philosophy in which the crucifixion of Christ cannot be expressed.

**A reading from the holy Gospel
according to Matthew 4:12–23**

Hearing that John had been arrested Jesus went back to Galilee, and leaving Nazareth he went and settled in Capernaum, a lakeside town on the borders of Zebulun and Naphtali. In this way the prophecy of Isaiah was to be fulfilled:

Land of Zebulun! Land of Naphtali!
Way of the sea on the far side of Jordan,
Galilee of the nations!
The people that lived in darkness
has seen a great light;
on those who dwell in the land and shadow of death
a light has dawned.

From that moment Jesus began his preaching with the message, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is close at hand'.

[As he was walking by the Sea of Galilee he saw two brothers, Simon, who was called Peter, and his brother Andrew; they were making a cast in the lake with their net, for they were fishermen. And he said to them, 'Follow me and I will make you fishers of men.' And they left their nets at once and followed him.

Going on from there he saw another pair of brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John; they were in their boat with their father Zebedee, mending their nets, and he called them. At once, leaving the boat and their father, they followed him.

He went round the whole of Galilee teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the Good News of the kingdom and curing all kinds of diseases and sickness among the people.]

[Short Form: omit text in brackets.]

Second Reading

No sooner has Paul completed his greeting and prayer of thanksgiving than he starts addressing the problems that have prompted his letter. He wastes no time chiding the Corinthians for the divisions and disagreements that have split the community. They have formed factions aligned with their favoured teacher, whether Paul, Apollo or Peter (here given his Aramaic name Cephas, pronounced SEE-fas), or even (as Paul sarcastically suggests) Christ himself.

This leads Paul to restate and reaffirm the nature of his apostolic calling. First and foremost, his mission is to proclaim the gospel. His role is to plough and sow the field with the word, as it were, paving the way for others to administer baptism. And the gospel he preaches is not a worldly wisdom but the mystery of the cross. He will have much more to say on this subject later in the letter.

The mood of this passage changes. It begins with a plea for unity but becomes challenging, even confrontational. We can feel Paul's exasperation coming to the surface. He throws their slogans back at them and fires off a series of questions before finally reminding them of his mission.

This reading is charged with energy. It should not be difficult for readers to put on Paul's sandals and deliver this text with the force it deserves.

Gospel

On the hinge feast joining Christmas to Ordinary Time – the Baptism of the Lord – we heard Matthew's account of the event. Last Sunday we heard the story again, as told indirectly by John. The next episode in all three synoptic gospels is Jesus' testing in the desert, but the lectionary omits it here in favour of the 1st Sunday of Lent. So today we are plunged into the heady first stage of Jesus' public ministry.

The longer option for the gospel falls into three parts: the inauguration of the mission, the call of the first disciples, and a summary conclusion. In keeping with his keen interest in fulfilment, Matthew cites the prophet Isaiah. Here he uses Isaiah's oracle of light to dispel the shadow cast by the Baptist's arrest (we have to wait another ten chapters to find out the reason for this arrest). It also identifies Galilee, and specifically Capernaum, as the initial locus of Jesus' ministry. Matthew alone underscores the continuity between John and Jesus by putting the same message on their lips: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is close at hand" (3:2; 4:17).

The next part of the gospel juxtaposes two stories, each recounting the call of two disciples (Matthew being fond of pairs). The third and final section comprises the first verses of an expansive description of Jesus' ministry, here summed up as teaching, preaching and healing.

Apart from the opening mention of the Baptist's arrest, this is an appealing and sunny account of the launch of Jesus' ministry. It's a blessing to hear it in these early weeks of the year.

Concluding Blessing

May the peace of God,
which surpasses all understanding,
keep our hearts and minds
in the knowledge and love of God,
and of his Son, our Lord Jesus Christ.

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 Ordinary Time II, Roman Missal p 715)