

SUNDAY READINGS

READ AT HOME

Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Year A

29 January 2023



Collect

Grant us, Lord our God,
that we may honour you with all our mind,
and love everyone in truth of heart.
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

Pope Francis wasted no time in putting his cards on the table. Less than nine months after becoming Bishop of Rome he spelt out his vision for the Church in his apostolic exhortation *The Joy of the Gospel*. Here's a little of what he had to say:

“God’s heart has a special place for the poor, so much so that he himself “became poor” (2 Cor 8:9). . . God shows the poor “his first mercy”. This divine preference has consequences for the faith life of all Christians, since we are called to have “this mind . . . which was in Jesus Christ” (Phil 2:5). . . This is why I want a Church which is poor and for the poor. They have much to teach us. . . We need to let ourselves be evangelised by them. . . We are called to find Christ in them, to lend our voice to their causes, but also to be their friends, to listen to them, to speak for them and to embrace the mysterious wisdom which God wishes to share with us through them”. (197-98)

A reading from the prophet Zephaniah
2:3; 3:12-13

Seek the Lord
all you, the humble of the earth,
who obey his commands.
Seek integrity,
seek humility:
you may perhaps find shelter
on the day of the anger of the Lord.
In your midst I will leave
a humble and lowly people,
and those who are left in Israel
will seek refuge in the name of the Lord.
They will do no wrong,
will tell no lies;
and the perjured tongue will no longer
be found in their mouths.
But they will be able to graze and rest
with no one to disturb them.

Responsorial Psalm **Ps 145:7-10**

R. Happy the poor in spirit;
the kingdom of heaven is theirs!
or
R. Alleluia!

It is the Lord who keeps faith for ever,
who is just to those who are oppressed.
It is he who gives bread to the hungry,
the Lord, who sets prisoners free. **R.**

It is the Lord who gives sight to the blind,
who raises up those who are bowed down,
the Lord, who protects the stranger
and upholds the widow and orphan. **R.**

It is the Lord who loves the just
but thwarts the path of the wicked.
The Lord will reign for ever,
Zion's God, from age to age. **R.**

First Reading

Nothing much seems to be known about the prophet Zephaniah himself. It's generally agreed that his work as a prophet took place sometime after Josiah became king of Judah at the age of eight around the year 640 BC. In his adult years Josiah undertook major reforms, so it's likely that Zephaniah's condemnations of corruption preceded them. Despite the work of both prophet and king, the disaster of the exile occurred in 587.

As well as his fearsome pronouncements about the "Day of the Lord" (giving rise to the medieval hymn, the *Dies irae*), Zephaniah is renowned for his focus on "the humble of the earth". These were the poor who put their trust in God's saving power, not in earthly wealth or might. As humble people of integrity, trust and truthfulness, these "anawim" (the Hebrew word) will survive while the rest are swept away.

The reading joins a verse from chapter two, spoken by the prophet, to a passage from chapter three, spoken by the Lord. Readers will need to note and convey this transition from one voice to another, as it isn't obvious from the layout of the text. Overall the reading has a meditative quality about it. It invites reflection on what distinguishes the poor in spirit. As such, it calls for thoughtful proclamation and a measured pace.

Responsorial Psalm

Psalm 145/146 is the first of the five psalms, all hymns of praise, that conclude the Book of Psalms. Each one begins and ends with the exclamation "Praise the Lord!" and are known as the Hallel psalms. In the first reading, the prophet Zephaniah lauded the lowly, foreshadowing the beatitudes of the Sermon on the Mount. The connection is made explicit here by the choice of the first beatitude (Mt 5:3) as the response instead of the customary psalm verse.

The second half of the psalm serves as the responsorial psalm today. In keeping with Zephaniah's message, the earlier verses of Psalm 145/146 carry a warning not to put one's trust in mortal princes. Like the prophet, the psalmist encourages trust in the Lord alone.

Each of the three stanzas begins with the phrase "It is the Lord". It is the Lord alone who is faithful, just, compassionate, caring and protective. Those whom the Lord cares for are the oppressed, the hungry, the imprisoned, the blind, the burdened, the stranger, the defenceless, the just – in brief, the poor and lowly.

The two-part response needs to be announced carefully, with an upward inflection on "spirit" to allow for a short pause before the second phrase is proceeded with. The reader's aim is to model this voicing of the response for the assembly to repeat. The verses present no difficulty; on the contrary they give the reader the opportunity to pray them with confident faith.

**A reading from the first letter of St Paul
to the Corinthians 1:26–31**

Take yourselves, brothers, at the time when you were called: how many of you were wise in the ordinary sense of the word, how many were influential people, or came from noble families? No, it was to shame the wise that God chose what is foolish by human reckoning, and to shame what is strong that he chose what is weak by human reckoning; those whom the world thinks common and contemptible are the ones that God has chosen - those who are nothing at all to show those who are everything. The human race has nothing to boast about to God, but you, God has made members of Christ Jesus and by God's doing he has become our wisdom, and our virtue, and our holiness, and our freedom. As scripture says: if anyone wants to boast, let him boast about the Lord.

**A reading from the holy Gospel
according to Matthew 5:1–12**

Seeing the crowds, Jesus went up the hill. There he sat down and was joined by his disciples. Then he began to speak. This is what he taught them:
'How happy are the poor in spirit;
theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
Happy the gentle:
they shall have the earth for their heritage.
Happy those who mourn:
they shall be comforted.
Happy those who hunger and thirst for what is right:
they shall be satisfied.
Happy the merciful:
they shall have mercy shown them.
Happy the pure in heart:
they shall see God.
Happy the peacemakers:
they shall be called sons of God.
Happy those who are persecuted in the cause of right:
theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
'Happy are you when people abuse you and persecute you and speak all kinds of calumny against you on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward will be great in heaven.'

Second Reading

Not satisfied with scolding the Corinthians for their rival factions, Paul proceeds to puncture their sense of importance. Did they pride themselves on the superiority of their wisdom, influence and status? How wrong they were! What they thought or made of themselves was of no account, it's God's work that mattered. And God chose the foolish, the weak and the common, precisely to reduce would-be "somebodies" like the Corinthians to "nobodies".

All this is exemplified by no-one less than the crucified Christ. In the preceding verses (sadly, never heard on a Sunday), Paul has testified that he preaches "a crucified Christ, to the Jews an obstacle . . . to the pagans madness, but to those who have been called . . . the power and wisdom of God". This is the lesson Paul learned for himself, as stated in the letter to the Philippians: "I count everything as so much rubbish if only I can have Christ" (3:8).

In brief, the Corinthians can claim no wisdom, virtue, holiness or freedom as their own. Instead, they have the wisdom, virtue, holiness and freedom that is Christ, and that is something to boast about. The first two-thirds of the reading is laced with sarcasm, but the last third is a powerful affirmation of the treasure they have gained in Christ. This is the climax towards which readers are to lead the assembly, with the final quote from the prophet Jeremiah rounding it off.

Gospel

Recent translations have Jesus going up the "mountain" rather than the "hill". This allows a much richer play of biblical associations. Mountain-tops were traditionally places of encounter with God and of divine revelation. Mt Sinai and Elijah come to mind, for example, and most especially Moses. By incorporating five discourses into his gospel, Matthew alludes to the five great books of the Torah. As the new Moses, Jesus proceeds in this first discourse to bring the Law to fulfilment.

Like the twin commandments to love God and neighbour, the beatitudes are not exactly original creations of Jesus. What Matthew has done is distil insights and teachings from the prophets and psalms and fashion them into a manifesto of the reign of God. They function as a kind of overture not only to the Sermon on the Mount but to the rest of the gospel in which they are expounded and exemplified. As much as they draw on tradition, they look forward to the new way things are to be in God's realm.

Though read only on this Sunday and All Saints Day, the beatitudes will be familiar to most worshippers. Those who proclaim this text will need to do so with freshness, conviction and deliberation.

Concluding Blessing

May almighty God bless us in his kindness
and pour out saving wisdom upon us.

Amen.

May he nourish us always with the teachings of the faith
and make us persevere in holy deeds.

Amen.

May he turn our steps towards himself
and show us the path of charity and peace.

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 III, Roman Missal p 715)