

SUNDAY READINGS

READ AT HOME

Sixth Sunday of Easter
17 May 2020



Collect

Grant, almighty God,
that we may celebrate with heartfelt devotion these days of joy,
which we keep in honour of the risen Lord,
and that what we relive in remembrance
we may always hold to in what we do.
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

For the past five weeks we, the long baptised and the newly baptised, have been relishing life in the Spirit. The gift of the Spirit is made more explicit today. We hear of an unexpected outpouring of the Spirit as recorded in the Acts of the Apostles, and we are reminded of Jesus promising the Advocate, the Spirit of truth, to his disciples on the night before he died. There's even a passing reference in 1 Peter to the Spirit in whom Christ "was raised to life."

All this helps make us more aware of the work of the Spirit in each one of us and in the Church at large. For too long in the Western Church the Holy Spirit was the "forgotten person" of the Trinity. More and more these days we are rediscovering the Spirit in dialogue with the Eastern Churches; their rich tradition is steeped in the Spirit. We in the West now have the opportunity to come to a new level of Spirit-awareness, not just during the Easter season but throughout the year.

A reading from the Acts of the Apostles 8:5–8, 14–17

Philip went to a Samaritan town and proclaimed the Christ to them. The people united in welcoming the message Philip preached, either because they had heard of the miracles he worked or because they saw them for themselves. There were, for example, unclean spirits that came shrieking out of many who were possessed, and several paralytics and cripples were cured. As a result there was great rejoicing in that town.

When the apostles in Jerusalem heard that Samaria had accepted the word of God, they sent Peter and John to them, and they went down there, and prayed for the Samaritans to receive the Holy Spirit, for as yet he had not come down on any of them: they had only been baptised in the name of the Lord Jesus. Then they laid hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit.

First Reading

Last week we heard the story of the election of seven men from the Jerusalem community to wait on tables. Nowhere after that is there any record of them ever doing so. Instead one of them – Stephen – becomes the first Christian martyr because of his provocative preaching. His stoning gives rise to a persecution that drove Christians out of Jerusalem – an event that is mentioned in the text from the NRSV but not in the standard lectionary.

Today's reading presents us with Philip, the only other member of the seven that we hear of again. Like Stephen he has become a preacher of the word, not a servant at table. In an episode that paves the way for the mission to the Gentiles, Philip preaches to the Samaritans. His work among these "hostile cousins" of the Jews reproduces that of Jesus; he preaches, exorcises and heals.

The whole story is one of vigorous activity and success. Readers will readily see that their task is to proclaim the text with positive energy. It is truly a "good news story".

The latter part of the text may seem to provide some justification for Churches that see baptism and confirmation as chronologically and theologically distinct. The Samaritans had been "baptised in the name of the Lord Jesus" but the Spirit "had not come down on any of them" until the apostles "laid hands on them". In fact the interconnection between water baptism, laying on of hands, and the giving of the Holy Spirit is quite complex in the Acts. The contemporary debate about the meaning and timing of confirmation shows no signs of letting up.

Responsorial Psalm Ps 65:1–7, 16, 20

R. Let all the earth cry out to God with joy.

or

R. Alleluia.

Cry out with joy to God all the earth,
O sing to the glory of his name.
O render him glorious praise.
Say to God: 'How tremendous your deeds! R.

'Before you all the earth shall bow;
shall sing to you, sing to your name!'
Come and see the works of God,
tremendous his deeds among men. R.

He turned the sea into dry land,
they passed through the river dry-shod.
Let our joy then be in him;
he rules for ever by his might. R.

Come and hear, all who fear God.
I will tell what he did for my soul:
Blessed be God who did not reject my prayer
nor withhold his love from me. R.

Responsorial Psalm

The source of today's responsorial psalm is Psalm 65/66, most of which is a joyous song of praise in memory of God's deliverance of Israel from bondage in Egypt. About half way through it becomes a personal hymn of thanksgiving from an individual who has experienced help from God. This shift is evident in the transition from the third to the fourth verse of the responsorial psalm.

The change from a collective voice to a single voice should be evident to the congregation. The first three verses are proclaimed in the name of the whole assembly; the fourth verse is an invitation to everyone to hear of a more personal experience.

The response is based on the opening lines of the psalm; it should be delivered with enthusiasm.

A reading from the first letter of St Peter

3:15–18

Reverence the Lord Christ in your hearts, and always have your answer ready for people who ask you the reason for the hope that you all have. But give it with courtesy and respect and with a clear conscience, so that those who slander you when you are living a good life in Christ may be proved wrong in the accusations that they bring. And if it is the will of God that you should suffer, it is better to suffer for doing right than for doing wrong.

Why, Christ himself, innocent though he was, had died once for sins, died for the guilty, to lead us to God. In the body he was put to death, in the spirit he was raised to life.

Second Reading

The communities to whom the first letter of Peter is sent appear to have an uneasy relationship with the Greco-Roman society which surrounds them. On the one hand they are advised not to be confrontational with their neighbours, so as not to give them grounds for taking offence. On the other they are encouraged to be true to their convictions.

In today's text they are told to "have your answer ready for people who ask you the reason for the hope that you have", but to "give it with courtesy and respect". And in a verse that harks back to the advice given to slaves two Sundays ago, they are instructed that "it is better to suffer for doing what is right than for doing wrong".

This practical advice gives rise to a short confession of faith. It declares that the innocent Christ died for the guilty to open their way to God. Even more briefly, "In the body he was put to death, in the spirit he was raised to life".

The reading thus begins with an exhortation but finishes with grounds for courage. Listeners should be able to hear both the challenge and the encouragement of this short text. It is the last excerpt we hear from 1 Peter this season because of Ascension and Pentecost.

A reading from the holy Gospel according to John

14:15–21

Jesus said to his disciples:

'If you love me you will keep my commandments. I shall ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate to be with you for ever, that Spirit of truth whom the world can never receive since it neither sees nor knows him; but you know him, because he is with you, he is in you. I will not leave your orphans; I will come back to you. In a short time the world will no longer see me; but you will see me, because I live and you will live. On that day you will understand that I am in my Father and you in me and I in you. Anybody who receives my commandments and keeps them will be one who loves me; and anybody who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I shall love him and show myself to him.'

Gospel

The gospel for today invites us into two intimate relationships. The first is that between Jesus and his disciples, the second is that shared between Jesus, his Father, and the Spirit.

Throughout this farewell discourse we have the sense of eavesdropping on an intimate conversation. The atmosphere is intense. The disciples have gathered with Jesus as the darkness deepens around them. They have been profoundly moved by Jesus' extraordinary gesture of washing their feet. They are troubled by his talk of treachery and desertion. This is the setting in which Jesus opens his heart in words of boundless affection.

In doing so he invites them – and us – into the communion of love that he shares with the Father and with the Spirit. He and the Spirit will not leave his chosen ones orphans; the disciples will come to know "that I am in the Father and you in me and I in you"; they will be loved by Father and Son and Jesus will make himself known to them.

This "loving out loud" does not proceed in a straight line. It spirals around as one idea suggests another by association. We are invited to let Jesus' words wrap us around with love that knows no bounds. This is the final extract we have from the farewell discourse this season.

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.)*