

Even as the season of Ordinary Time begins to gather momentum, many may still be on summer holidays or at least in a holiday frame of mind. Today's readings have a dynamism about them that jolt us out of our easy lethargy. Welcome or unwelcome, the call to repent – to change our ways – is in the air.

We hear of the prophet Jonah's successful mission to the Ninevites of old; we hear Jesus' summons to his hearers to "repent and believe the Good News"; and we hear Paul the apostle warning the Corinthians (and now us) that the approach of the end times calls for freedom of heart. Most of the time we do not like change, even when it promises better things. This Sunday is our opportunity to move into the new school and working year with a willingness to "let go and let God".

A reading from the prophet Jonah

3:1–5, 10

The word of the Lord was addressed to Jonah: 'Up!' he said 'Go to Nineveh, the great city, and preach to them as I told you to.' Jonah set out and went to Nineveh in obedience to the word of the Lord. Now Nineveh was a city great beyond compare: it took three days to cross it. Jonah went on into the city, making a day's journey. He preached in these words, 'Only forty days more and Nineveh is going to be destroyed.' And the people of Nineveh believed in God; they proclaimed a fast and put on sackcloth from the greatest to the least.

God saw their efforts to renounce their evil behaviour. And God relented: he did not inflict on them the disaster which he had threatened.

Responsorial Psalm

Ps 24:4–9

R. Teach me your ways, O Lord.
 Lord, make me know your ways.
 Lord, teach me your paths.
 Make me walk in your truth, and teach me:
 for you are God my saviour. R.
 Remember your mercy, Lord,
 and the love you have shown from of old.
 In your love remember me,
 because of your goodness, O Lord. R.
 The Lord is good and upright.
 He shows the path to those who stray,
 he guides the humble in the right path;
 he teaches his way to the poor. R.

First Reading

The readings begin with a short extract from the book of Jonah. Though included among the books of the prophets, Jonah is quite different from the others. It is in the form of a fable, a satire that is both engaging and sharply critical at the same time. The story raises serious questions about the mercy and justice of God. Why should the hated and feared Assyrians be converted and forgiven instead of being punished for their sins against God and his chosen people Israel?

The passage that we read takes us to the heart of the work: Jonah's mission to preach to the Ninevites, his success in calling them to repentance, and the generosity of God's mercy. The brevity of the text regrettably deprives us of most of the colour and drama of the tale. Readers would do well to read the whole story (it's only four chapters) to be reminded of Jonah's initial rebellion against his call and of his subsequent sulking when his mission is an out-and-out success.

The reading that we have is straightforward enough – too much so, perhaps. Nonetheless there is enough action and dialogue to enable the reader to proclaim the text with positive energy and sustain the congregation's attention.

Responsorial Psalm

Psalm 24/25 is the prayer of a person in great distress who calls on God for his saving help as of old. As was the case with the first reading, the extract that we have eliminates the drama of the psalmist's plight. The three verses all breathe a calm spirit of confident trust, though elsewhere in the psalm there are heartfelt pleas for help.

As set out for us the first two verses are in the form of a prayer to God for the gifts of wisdom, truth, mercy, love and goodness. The tone readers will naturally adopt is one of trusting faith in the giver of all good gifts. The response is short and clear, easy enough for the congregation to make its own. The third verse is a declaration, a simple confession of faith in the loving-kindness of God.

A reading from the first letter of St Paul to the Corinthians

7:29–31

Brothers: our time is growing short. Those who have wives should live as though they had none, and those who mourn should live as though they had nothing to mourn for; those who are enjoying life should live as though there were nothing to laugh about; those whose life is buying things should live as though they had nothing of their own; and those who have to deal with the world should not become engrossed in it. I say this because the world as we know it is passing away.

A reading from the holy Gospel according to Mark

1:14–20

After John had been arrested, Jesus went into Galilee. There he proclaimed the Good News from God. 'The time has come' he said 'and the kingdom of God is close at hand. Repent, and believe the Good News.'

As he was walking along by the Sea of Galilee he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net in the lake - for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, 'Follow me and I will make you into fishers of men.' And at once they left their nets and followed him.

Going on a little further, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John; they too were in their boat, mending their nets, he called them at once, and, leaving their father Zebedee in the boat with the men he employed, they went after him.

Second Reading

The whole of Chapter 7 of Paul's first letter to the Corinthians is devoted to the issue of states of life, most especially marriage and virginity, in the light of the expected return of Christ in glory. Much of what Paul writes is still the subject of lively debate, and even today some of it remains obscure.

The short passage that we read reveals the perspective under which Paul is considering the question of relationships – that of the end times. In this early letter the expectation of the imminent fulfilment of salvation is still strong. Hence Paul argues in a series of paradoxical assertions that the Corinthians should live with great freedom from the claims of ordinary life in the world. Two millennia later, even as our eschatological expectations have waned, we still face the challenge of how to live "in the world" without being held captive by it. This is especially the case with regard to our God-given sexuality.

Readers should allow each of Paul's declarations its proper weight. The reading has a sense of urgency about it but should not be rushed through.

Gospel

In rapid succession the opening verses of Mark's gospel deal with the preaching of John the Baptist and the baptism and the testing of Jesus. Today we hear about the start of Jesus' public ministry. It begins under the shadow of the cross, "after John had been arrested". At the outset Mark wants to warn his readers that Jesus will be a suffering Messiah. All the same, Jesus' first words, his manifesto, are full of promise: "The time has come and the kingdom of God is close at hand. Repent, and believe the Good News".

Immediately Jesus calls disciples to be associated with him in his mission. In contrast to the account that we heard from John's gospel last Sunday, this is the more familiar story of the call of the fishermen, Simon and Andrew, and James and John.

The reading is relatively short but full of action. In Mark's gospel Jesus and his disciples are constantly on the move. There is no time to waste, for "the kingdom of God is close at hand".