

Sunday Readings during Lent

Lent is an opportune season for us to reflect more deeply on the word of God in a spirit of prayer. We read the following in the *Ceremonial of Bishops*: “The annual observance of Lent is the special season for the ascent to the holy mountain of Easter....The faithful, listening more intently to the word of God and devoting themselves to prayer, are prepared through a spirit of repentance to renew their baptismal promises.”¹ Shortly before each Sunday during Lent, we will post the scripture readings for that Sunday’s celebration of Eucharist with a simple guide to help you pray with the Lord through his presence in the word.

A General Overview of the Sunday Scriptures during Lent ~ Year B

Each liturgical year bears its own cycle of readings which are proclaimed during the Sunday Eucharist in the Roman Catholic Church. We are in “Cycle B” this year. Let’s briefly look at the thrust of these readings which will help us to encounter the Lord as we make our way toward Easter.

The First Readings: From the First to the Fifth Sunday of Lent, the first readings lay before us a “five-stage thumbnail sketch” of the mighty, saving acts of God through human history as proclaimed in the Old Testament (the Hebrew Scriptures).² On Passion Sunday, the 1st Reading proclaims the “suffering servant” as prophesied in the Book of the Prophet Isaiah.

The Second Readings: Taken from the apostolic letters, each of these readings “directly or indirectly, and always as refracted through the Lenten themes of penance and baptism, proclaims the paschal mystery of Christ.”³

The Gospel: The First Week of Lent focuses on the account of Jesus in the desert and his temptation prior to his public ministry in the Gospel according to Mark. The Second Week of Lent presents to us Mark’s version of the Transfiguration of the Lord. From the Third to the Fifth Sunday of Lent, we hear from the Gospel according to John, with a focus on “the self-abasement and exaltation of Jesus as the fundamental pattern of Christian life.”⁴ On Passion Sunday, we proclaim the Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ according to Mark.

¹ International Commission on English in the Liturgy, *Ceremonial of Bishops*. (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1989), par. 249, pg. 88.

² Normand Bonneau, *The Sunday Lectionary: Ritual Word, Paschal Shape*. (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1998), 96.

³ *Ibid.*, 105.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 102.

Scripture Readings for the First Sunday of Lent ~ Year B

1st Reading ~ Genesis 9:18-15

- ❖ Having destroyed an evil generation through a great flood, God enters into covenant with Noah, Noah's descendents, and all of creation. God remains faithful to Creation, even after people had rejected God. God promises a fresh start to Noah, a new beginning, and a permanence of relationship with God's people no matter what.¹ The early Church Fathers have long seen this as a prefiguring of the waters of Baptism which unite the baptised to Christ and his saving death and resurrection.²

2nd Reading ~ 1 Peter 3: 18-22

- ❖ The salvation offered through Christ's death and resurrection are emphasised in this passage. Through Christ's new and everlasting covenant and our participation in this Paschal Mystery through Baptism, we are liberated from sin and death.³

Gospel ~ Mark 1:12-15

- ❖ This account by Mark of the temptation of Jesus in the wilderness is very brief. It takes place between the Lord's Baptism and the beginning of his public ministry. The Holy Spirit "drove him" into the wilderness. From this experience, he comes forth with a proclamation and an urgent invitation.⁴

¹ Days of the Lord: The Liturgical Year, Volume 2: Lent. (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1993), 49.

² Kevin I. Irwin, Lent: A Guide to the Eucharist and Hours. (New York: Pueblo Publishing Company, 1985), 30.

³ Normand Bonneau, The Sunday Lectionary: Ritual Word, Paschal Shape. (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1998), 106.

⁴ Days of the Lord, 52.

Praying with the Scriptures: a simple method

In preparation for or further meditation upon this Sunday's readings, the following method of prayer may be helpful to you during this season of Lent.¹

1. Choose one of the readings for this Sunday.
2. Find a quiet place in your home where you can sit without being distracted and prepare yourself for prayer. Ask the Holy Spirit to guide you through your prayerful reading of the passage you have chosen.
3. Slowly, read through the passage you have chosen. Gently notice any stirring of your heart as you read the scripture. Is there a word, image, or phrase that you are drawn to or leaps out of the page? You may have to slowly read through the passage a few times until something surfaces for you.
4. Remain with the word, image, or phrase for it has caught your attention. Imagine the scene. Meditate upon it. Experience this word or phrase as addressed to you. Perhaps, repeat the word or phrase and allow it to sink into your heart.
5. After spending some time meditating upon that portion of the scripture passage which "spoke" to you and when you feel ready, simply talk to God in the silence of your heart about what you are experiencing.
6. When you have finished placing what is in your heart before God, spend some time in loving silence and openness to the presence of the Lord.
7. When you are ready, conclude your prayer by giving thanks to God.

¹ This type of prayer with the scriptures is called "*Lectio Divina*" or "Divine Reading". It has a long history within our Catholic tradition. For further reading, a very good introduction to this form of prayer (which has been consulted for the method described above) is Thelma Hall's book *Too Deep for Words: Rediscovering Lectio Divina*, New York/Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1988.

Scripture Readings for the Second Sunday of Lent ~ Year B

1st Reading ~ Genesis 22:1-2, 9-13, 15-18

- ❖ When hearing the story about the testing of Abraham, one must remember the earlier story of God's promise to Abraham: that his descendants will be more numerous than the stars. It makes no sense that Abraham should be asked to sacrifice his only son. Nevertheless, this father of faith prepares to follow the command with trusting obedience. He becomes an example of one who holds fast to hope in God and God's promise. Why do you think this dramatic passage is proclaimed on this Sunday of Lent?

2nd Reading ~ Romans 8:31b-35, 37

- ❖ This second reading from the Letter of St. Paul to the Romans expresses adamant certainty about God's love for us. What is Paul's justification for this stance? Namely, that God the Father sent his only Son into the world to lead us back to him. Even though we rejected him and crucified him, God's love conquered sin and death by raising Jesus from the dead, so that he now intercedes for us to the Father. Nothing, therefore, can separate us from the love of God with such an advocate.

Gospel ~ Mark 9:2-10

- ❖ As we enter into the holy season of Lent, the Gospel proclamation on the Second Sunday focuses on the Transfiguration. Why is it important to enter into this profound mystery of Jesus' identity as we begin our journey to Jerusalem, to his suffering, death and resurrection? Mark's account is very direct and brief, when compared to Luke's and Matthew's accounts. The statement and directive made by the voice from the cloud equally applies to us as it did to Peter, James and John.

Scripture Readings for the Third Sunday of Lent ~ Year B

1st Reading ~ Exodus 20:1-17

- ❖ Once again, the first reading from the Old Testament proclaims another of God's great acts in salvation history. This time, we hear from the momentous story of God giving the Ten Commandments (or Decalogue) on Mount Sinai. It should be noted that in giving "the fundamental law that regulates the moral life of the people," God prefaces the Commandments by identifying Godself as the One who freed the Hebrew people from the oppression they suffered in Egypt.¹

2nd Reading ~ 1 Corinthians 1:18, 22-25

- ❖ This second reading is an excerpt from the Letter of St. Paul to the Corinthians. The focus of the second reading continues, as it does so throughout the season of Lent, to be on an aspect of the Paschal Mystery. Today, we focus on the mystery of Jesus Christ's death on the Cross: the great paradox that an all-powerful God would choose this instrument of humiliation and act of self-emptying as the means through which salvation is given to the world.²

Gospel ~ John 2:13-25

- ❖ We proclaim the story of Jesus driving out the merchants and the money changers from the Temple as described in the Gospel according to St. John. This event is portrayed in the Gospel as a sign or fulfilment of messianic prophecy (Zech. 14:21).³ It is followed by the prophetic voice of Jesus, who alludes to his own death and resurrection when speaking of the destruction and rebuilding of the Temple: actions "always connected with the dispersion and reunification of God's people, with the salvation of the nations..."⁴

¹ Days of the Lord: The Liturgical Year, Volume 2: Lent. (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1993), 136.

² *Ibid.*, 138-139.

³ *Ibid.*, 141.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 140.

Scripture Readings for the Fourth Sunday of Lent ~ Year B

1st Reading ~ 2 Chronicles 36: 14-17a, 19-23

- ❖ The events of salvation history, that is God's saving involvement in the world, continue to be proclaimed in the first reading. This time, we explore with a broad sweep the history of the chosen people of Israel. Here we have the author of 2 *Chronicles* describing a people's turning from God, prophetic warnings, a reluctance to heed the voice of the prophets, punishment, exile, liberation and return. All of this is described in the context of the unending mercy of God. Even in the face of the people's hardness of heart, "God never gives up but makes salvation ever available," even through surprising ways.¹

2nd Reading ~ Ephesians 2: 4-10

- ❖ We continue with the theme of God's infinite mercy in our second reading. In the *Letter to the Ephesians*, we focus on St. Paul's proclamation about the generous mercy of God the Father who reveals to us the depth of God's love by sending Jesus Christ: the definitive revelation of God's mercy and forgiveness. Through Jesus Christ's death and resurrection, salvation has been given and we receive forgiveness of our sins, not through our own part but as recipients of God's freely given gift of salvation.² Our response to this gift is a daily expression of good works that mark us as undeserved recipients of God's grace.³

Gospel ~ John 3: 14-21

- ❖ In this passage from the Gospel according to St. John, we hear Jesus Christ proclaim for the first time his incarnate identity as the Son of God and his saving mission: "He is God's Son come into the world bringing God's own life, so that everyone who believes in him has eternal life and thus is already judged."⁴ Jesus' conversation is with Nicodemus, a Pharisee who approaches the Lord in the night inquiring about his teaching and identity. Nicodemus is a person who is searching. The importance of the cross and Christ crucified as the great sign of God's love, salvation, and reconciliation is alluded to in the words: "so must the Son of Man be lifted up." (John 3:14) Here we proclaim Jesus Christ as the definitive response of God to a world in darkness. The invitation to each person is to look upon Christ crucified, come into the light of his grace, and have eternal life.⁵

¹ "Lectionary Commentary for the Fourth Sunday of Lent," *The Lent Book: An ML Book*. Edited by Lonni Collins Pratt, (San Jose, CA: Resource Publications, Inc., 1999), 84.

² *Days of the Lord: The Liturgical Year*. Volume 2: Lent. (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1993), 147.

³ *Ibid.*, 148.

⁴ Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament*. (New York/London: Doubleday, 1997), 342.

⁵ *Days of the Lord*, 149.

Scripture Readings for the Fifth Sunday of Lent ~ Year B

1st Reading ~ Jeremiah 31:31-34

- ❖ In this hopeful reading, a prophetic promise is made to a people in exile. We are given a context, namely, the covenant made when God freed the people from the bondage of Egypt. God remained faithful to this covenant, but the people turned away from it again and again. Now, a new promise is given: a new covenant to be made by the Lord with the houses of Israel and Judah. It will not be an external set of laws to be followed in a legalistic way, but a covenant of relationship, forgiveness and communion inscribed in the human heart.¹ This is the only place in the Hebrew Scriptures (Old Testament) that contains the words “new covenant,” a term readily embraced by the early Christians to describe the new and everlasting covenant of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.²

2nd Reading ~ Hebrews 5:7-9

- ❖ In this brief excerpt from the *Letter to the Hebrews* we explore another aspect of the Paschal Mystery. We are given everlasting life because of Jesus’ obedience to the Father. Written from the predominantly Mediterranean social perspective of the time (a period when male children were abruptly and traumatically weaned from the sheltered protection of their mothers in order to learn the cultural expectations of men), the author presents the mystery of Christ’s suffering and death on the cross as a parallel.³ Salvation comes to the world through Jesus’ obedience to the will of the Father (a new and everlasting covenant with the whole world), even though this meant that Jesus needed to freely embrace the suffering of the cross and lay down his life.⁴

Gospel ~ John 12:20-33

- ❖ In this rich passage, we are pointed again to the importance of Jesus Christ’s death on the cross as the great sign of God’s fidelity and love for the world. Through the parable of the grain of wheat which must be buried in order to bear fruit, we get a glimpse into the meaning of Christ’s own death.⁵ This obedience to the will of the Father is offered as a pattern for all who follow Jesus. Lest we become frightened by this path, we are again given a glimpse of Jesus’ identity and the ultimate meaning of his self-giving through the resounding voice of the Father.⁶

¹ Days of the Lord: The Liturgical Year. Volume 2: Lent. (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1993), 153.

² *Ibid.*, 152.

³ “Lectionary Commentary for the Fourth Sunday of Lent,” The Lent Book: An ML Book. Edited by Lonni Collins Pratt, (San Jose, CA: Resource Publications, Inc., 1999), 84.

⁴ Days of the Lord: The Liturgical Year, 155.

⁵ Normand Bonneau, The Sunday Lectionary: Ritual Word, Paschal Shape. (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1998), 101.

⁶ Days of the Lord: The Liturgical Year, 159-160.

Scripture Readings for Passion (Palm) Sunday ~ Year B

Procession with Palms

Gospel: Mark 11: 1-10 or John 12: 12-16

- ❖ There are two choices for the Gospel proclamation after the blessing of the palm branches. Both recall Jesus' triumphant entrance into Jerusalem.
- ❖ St. Mark's account employs the phrase "on the road" (v. 8), which the evangelist has used throughout the Gospel to denote the way that the disciple must follow in order to imitate Jesus.¹ The evangelist also includes "the coming kingdom of our ancestor David" to emphasise that Jesus' triumph is not a worldly kingdom, but the kingdom of the heavenly Father.²
- ❖ The passage from the *Gospel According to John* was preceded by the account of the raising of Lazarus, thus, the acclaim of the crowd is partially due to this miracle.³ The evangelist is also careful to point out that Jesus is not a political liberator but the Messiah, whose great glory, the cross, will open the way of salvation for the whole world.⁴

Liturgy of the Word

1st Reading ~ Isaiah 50: 4-7

- ❖ In this reading, we hear a portion from the Third Song of the Suffering Servant from the Book of the Prophet Isaiah. The Suffering Servant is a figure whose identity is debated by scripture scholars, but who was embraced by the Early Church as Jesus in his own suffering and death.⁵

2nd Reading ~ Philippians 2: 6-11

- ❖ The second reading is the famous hymn from Paul's letter which descriptively proclaims the Lord as the one who embraces self-emptying servant-hood in obedience to the will of the Father, and in this selfless act is given glory.⁶

Gospel ~ Mark 14: 1 – 15:47

- ❖ The *Passion According to Mark* leads us to the scandal of the cross and an invitation to faith: that Jesus would choose to die in order to establish a new and everlasting covenant with the Father, and only reveal his true identity as the Son of God through the humiliation of the cross. The evangelist highlights this new covenant by pointing to the Temple veil being rent in two and invites the hearer to proclaim in faith the centurion's exclamation: "Truly this man was God's Son!"(15:39)⁷

¹ Kevin W. Irwin, Lent: a guide to Eucharist and Hours. (New York: Pueblo Publishing, 1985), 258.

² Ibid., 258.

³ Ibid., 258-259.

⁴ Ibid., 259.

⁵ Normand Bonneau, The Sunday Lectionary. (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1998), 108.

⁶ Days of the Lord: The Liturgical Year. Volume 2: Lent. (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1993), 223.

⁷ Ibid., 227-228.