

"The harvest is rich but the labourers are few, so ask the Lord of the harvest to send labourers to his harvest". How often has Jesus' remark been adopted to appeal for vocations to religious life and the priesthood! A worthy cause indeed, and still commendable, but with the unfortunate side-effect of obscuring the call of all the baptised to mission.

In the Eucharistic Prayer for Use in Masses for Various Needs III, we pray: "Grant that all the faithful of the Church, looking into the signs of the times by the light of faith, may constantly devote themselves to the service of the Gospel. Keep us attentive to the needs of all that, sharing their grief and pain, their joy and hope, we may faithfully bring them the good news of salvation and go forward with them along the way of your Kingdom".

That's a prayer that deserves a Great Amen!

A reading from the book of Exodus 19:2-6

From Rephidim the Israelites set out again; and when they reached the wilderness of Sinai, there in the wilderness they pitched their camp; there facing the mountain Israel pitched camp.

Moses then went up to God, and the Lord called to him from the mountain, saying, 'Say this to the House of Jacob, declare this to the sons of Israel, "You yourselves have seen what I did with the Egyptians, how I carried you on eagle's wings and brought you to myself. From this you know that now, if you obey my voice and hold fast to my covenant, you of all the nations shall be my very own, for all the earth is mine. I will count you a kingdom of priests, a consecrated nation."'

Responsorial Psalm Ps 99:2-3, 5

R. We are his people: the sheep of his flock.

Cry out with joy to the Lord, all the earth.

Serve the Lord with gladness.

Come before him, singing for joy. **R.**

Know that he, the Lord, is God.

He made us, we belong to him,

we are his people, the sheep of his flock. **R.**

Indeed, how good is the Lord,

eternal his merciful love.

He is faithful from age to age. **R.**

First Reading

A more extended version of this passage from the book of Exodus is found among the readings for the vigil of Pentecost. Here an introductory verse provides a helpful guide to the context. On their way through the desert after deliverance from Egypt the Israelites set up camp at the foot of Mt Sinai. It is here that God will be further revealed to Moses, the Torah given to Israel, and the people called into covenant.

The substance of the reading consists in what God tells Moses to say to the people. It is a message of memory and hope. The Israelites are reminded of God's saving deeds on their behalf: "how I carried you on eagle's wings and brought you to myself". On this basis they can have confidence in what God promises: "I will count you a kingdom of priests, a consecrated nation". Much later on, in the first letter of Peter (2:9), this promise is applied to the Christian community.

The reading has several elements to it: the opening statement that sets the scene, the introduction of Moses and the Lord, God's brief instruction to Moses, and the proclamation that Moses is to make to the people. Apart from checking the pronunciation of "Rephidim" and "Sinai" readers do not have to contend with any particular difficulties. Their main task is to proclaim the text in such a way that the congregation is led through its different components to the emphatic declaration with which it concludes.

Responsorial Psalm

Psalm 99/100 is a short outburst of praise and thanksgiving for the goodness of God. The response, taken from within the psalm, clearly establishes the grounds for our praise: we are God's people, and God is our shepherd. Thus the psalm echoes the first reading's account of God's choice of Israel as his covenanted people. It also looks ahead to what Jesus has to say in today's gospel.

Readers will see that the lectionary presents just three of the four verses of the psalm. Each verse has only three lines, and each line is quite short. In other words, the whole text is quite brief. The language is also straightforward. The readers' task appears simple, deceptively so because there is a hidden temptation – to pray the psalm too quickly. The very brevity of the verses calls for a consciously moderate pace that allows the congregation to enter into the psalm's glad spirit of praise.

A reading from the letter of St Paul to the Romans 5:6-11

We were still helpless when at his appointed moment Christ died for sinful men. It is not easy to die even for a good man - though of course for someone really worthy, a man might be prepared to die - but what proves that God loves us is that Christ died for us while we were still sinners. Having died to make us righteous, is it likely that he would now fail to save us from God's anger? When we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, we were still enemies; now that we have been reconciled surely we may count on being saved by the life of his Son? Not merely because we have been reconciled but because we are filled with joyful trust in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have already gained our reconciliation.

A reading from the holy Gospel according to Matthew 9:36 - 10:8

When Jesus saw the crowds he felt sorry for them because they were harassed and dejected, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, 'The harvest is rich but the labourers are few, so ask the Lord of the harvest to send labourers to his harvest.'

He summoned his twelve disciples, and gave them authority over unclean spirits with power to cast them out and to cure all kinds of diseases and sickness.

These are the names of the twelve apostles: first, Simon who is called Peter, and his brother Andrew; James the son of Zebedee, and his brother John; Philip and Bartholomew; Thomas, and Matthew the tax collector; James the son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus; Simon the Zealot and Judas Iscariot, the one who was to betray him. These twelve Jesus sent out, instructing them as follows:

'Do not turn your steps to pagan territory, and do not enter any Samaritan town; go rather to the lost sheep of the House of Israel. And as you go, proclaim that the kingdom of heaven is close at hand. Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out devils. You received without charge, give without charge.'

Second Reading

Today's passage from Paul's letter to the Romans is the third in a series of sixteen, the first few of which are almost never heard because of the vagaries of the calendar. It has a clear message at its heart: "Christ died for us while we were still sinners". The message is plain but the reading as a whole isn't so simple. The chapter from which it is taken is a bridge that connects the earlier part of the letter with later themes, so its full meaning isn't immediately obvious. And here as elsewhere, Paul doesn't express himself simply.

The reading is in the form of an *a fortiori* argument which could be summarised as follows. If Christ died for us when we were still sinners and enemies of God, all the more will he be sure to save us from God's anger now that we have been reconciled. Those who are puzzled by what "God's anger" means will need to re-read the earlier chapters of the letter, perhaps with the help of a commentary.

Readers will need to prepare well for this proclamation, taking the time to trace the line of Paul's thought. It is useful to remember that Paul often proceeds as if engaged in an argument, anticipating and responding to objections. If readers have access to the NRSV lectionary they will see how the text has been set out in shorter, more intelligible lines. This should help them identify where to pause and where to put the emphases if they are reading from the standard lectionary. The NRSV also provides the advantage of inclusive language.

Gospel

The lectionary leapfrogs over a few stories that Matthew has in common with Mark and Luke. This means that last Sunday's call of Matthew is followed today by a focus on mission. The reading falls into four parts.

The first reports on Jesus' own call to mission. It is said that Jesus "felt sorry" (JB) or "felt compassion" (NRSV) for the crowds but neither translation does justice to the gut-wrenching power of Jesus' emotion. He is driven to reverse the centuries of false shepherding that failed the people of God, and he wants others to share his passion.

Next, and oddly before naming the Twelve, he charges them with the ministry of spiritual and bodily healing that was so central to his own mission. The choice of twelve underscores Jesus' missionary purpose: to gather together the scattered children of God, once united as the twelve tribes of Israel.

Part three lists the names of the apostles. No two lists have the same names in the same order, and some of those named scarcely reappear in the gospel story.

In the fourth and final part Jesus provides the Twelve with a more expansive mandate, though still narrowly directed at the "house of Israel". In sum, they are to proclaim the good news that "the kingdom of heaven has come near". It would be of service to the congregation if each of these four parts was given its own distinct identity by judicious pausing.