

First Reading, Holy Week and Easter Season : Year B, 2021

Holy Week

The readings for Holy Week focus on the suffering and death of Jesus Christ, son of Mary and Joseph and Son of God. On Maundy Thursday, we celebrate the institution of the Eucharist, and read the account of Jesus washing the disciples' feet, demonstrating the nature of Christian discipleship and service. The readings from the Old Testament reflect these major themes.

During the major celebrations of Holy Week the first reading includes passages from the prophet Isaiah on Palm Sunday, Good Friday and Holy Saturday (Easter Vigil), from Exodus on Maundy Thursday and the Easter Vigil, and from Genesis during the Easter Vigil. (There are four other possible Old Testament readings during the Easter Vigil, from Genesis 22, Isaiah 54, Baruch 3, and Ezekiel 36, but they are usually omitted.)

Palm Sunday, Isaiah 50:4–7

The third Servant Song describes the nation of Israel, in history and captivity, as persecuted and humiliated. However, despite humiliation and weakness the Servant offers no resistance. Instead, the Lord comes to the Servant's aid so that he is 'untouched by insults' and 'shall not be shamed'.

Maundy Thursday, Exodus 12:1–8, 11–14

The description of the Passover ritual emphasises the movement into sacred time, the tenth day of 'the first month of your year'. The ritual takes place in a simple domestic and community setting, with the sacrifice offered 'in honour of the Lord'.

Good Friday, Isaiah 52:13–53:12

The fourth Servant Song describes the suffering and the vindication of the Servant. He is shunned and despised; he takes on the sins of all yet does not complain. Though suffering greatly 'he never opened his mouth'. By 'letting himself be taken for a sinner' and surrendering himself to death he justified many.

Holy Saturday, Genesis 1:1–2:2

The opening verses of the Old Testament recount the story of God's creation of all things. God created 'man' as male and female, in the image of God, to be master over all the earth. Then God rested 'on the seventh day.'

Holy Saturday, Exodus 14:15–15:1

Under the leadership of Moses, the 'sons of Israel' escape from the pursuing Egyptians. The Lord intervenes to deliver them through the Red Sea while, at the same time, destroying their pursuers. The people then 'put their faith in the Lord and in Moses, his servant'.

Holy Saturday, Isaiah 55:1–11

The people are urged to return to Jerusalem, relying on their covenant with God, the source of everything needed to sustain life. This return also means turning back to the Lord and to the unfathomable ways of God. While God remains mysterious—'my ways are not your ways'—the people remain dependant on God whose promise is carried out through their lives.

Background to the Old Testament Readings

Isaiah is one of the longest and certainly one of the most important books of the Old Testament. Many gospel themes are foreshadowed in the 'fifth gospel' as it has been called. In

addition to the reading of the Servant Songs in Holy Week, it is used frequently during the year, and in Advent and Christmas seasons. Isaiah was an eight-century prophet, but the book was written over several centuries and probably took its final form between the 4th and 2nd centuries B.C. Scholars typically divide it into three parts which they call First Isaiah (Ch. 1–23, 28–39), Second or Deutero-Isaiah (Ch. 40–55), and Third or Trito-Isaiah (Ch. 56–66). A further component, probably no later than the 4th century, is found in Chapters 24–27.

Isaiah's major themes are that God is the Holy One of Israel, like no other god. By contrast with the 'Holy One', God's people fail repeatedly; they rebel, they fail to trust God, follow other gods and fail to protect the poor. *Isaiah* says we are summoned to a life of faith and fidelity to God. This is the basis for our hope even during periods when the people turn away.

Genesis is the first of the five books of Moses known as the Torah, the Pentateuch or the Law. Genesis is the story of beginnings: of the universe, of humans, of joys and sorrows, and of the relationship between God and all creation, particularly mankind. Some scholars divide *Genesis* into three parts: the Primeval Story (Ch. 1–11) on the earliest beginnings of the universe; the Ancestral Story (Ch. 12–36) which introduces ancestors of God's people like Abraham and Sarah, Jacob and his wives, Leah and Rachel; and the second part of the Ancestral Story (Ch. 37–50) with its focus on Joseph, son of Jacob. The literary genres in Genesis include myths, saga and genealogy, predominantly from two sources but from four strands in total.

The book of *Exodus* is the second of the five books of the Torah and continues the story of Israel's journey with God begun in *Genesis*. It tells of how God delivered the people from Egypt, and the freedom they gained from the covenant relationship they sealed with God in the Ten Commandments given to Moses on Mount Sinai. *Exodus* is an anthology of liturgy and literature from nearly all periods of Israel's history, possibly reaching a final form in the exilic period (6th century B.C.).

Further Reading

Harold A Buetow, *Thirst for Life*, Meditations/homilies for the Weekdays of the Year, Vol 1, St Mark. (notes on the Pentateuch, Genesis). St Paul's

Harold A Buetow, *The New Out of the Old*, Meditations/homilies for the Weekdays of the Year, Vol 2, St Matthew. (notes on Exodus, books of Prophecy, Isaiah). St Paul's

Joan Cook S.C., *Genesis*. Vol 2, Old Testament, New Collegeville Bible Commentary. Liturgical Press

David N Freedman (ed.), *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible*. Eerdmans

Leslie J Hoppe O.F.M., *Isaiah*. Vol 13, Old Testament, New Collegeville Bible Commentary. Liturgical Press

John J Pilch, *The Cultural World of the Prophets*. The First Reading, Year by Year. Year B. Liturgical Press

Mark S Smith, *Exodus*. Vol 3, Old Testament, New Collegeville Bible Commentary. Liturgical Press

Easter Season

The gospel readings for Easter Season are almost all taken from the Gospel of John and centre on the appearances of the risen Lord, the nature of faith in the risen Jesus, and on preparation of the apostles for receiving the Holy Spirit at Pentecost and their future mission.

The first readings for this Season are all taken from the *Acts of the Apostles*. They focus on similar themes to those in the gospel readings, and highlight the life and work of the first Christian community in Jerusalem. In Australia, the feast of the Ascension is celebrated instead of the 7th Sunday in Easter. The second reading for the feast is also taken from *Acts*.

Easter Sunday, Acts of the Apostles 10:34, 37–43

Peter addresses the household of Cornelius, a Roman centurion and convert, giving a rich account of Luke's theology and Jesus' ministry to its culmination in his death and resurrection. No matter what anyone's background may be, if they are receptive to God's revelation then they are acceptable to God.

Second Sunday of Easter, Acts of the Apostles 4:32–35

In this cameo of life in the Jerusalem Christian community, Luke shows how God worked through the leadership of the apostles to continue Jesus' preaching. Echoing Old Testament themes, the community lived in friendship and treated others justly.

Third Sunday of Easter, Acts of the Apostles 3:13–15, 17–19

When the crowd wants to attribute the healing of a lame man to the apostles (Acts 3:1–12), Peter points instead to God's power, to the God of the Israelites. It is the Son of God, 'his servant Jesus', who had been put to death by Pilate but then raised by God's power. Our response must be to 'repent and turn to God' so our sins 'may be wiped out'.

Fourth Sunday of Easter, Acts of the Apostles 4:8–12

When Peter (and others) were arrested for healing the lame man and brought before the Sanhedrin (Acts 4:1–7), Peter responds by pointing again towards the death and resurrection of 'Jesus Christ the Nazarene', underlining the power of God who brings us ultimate salvation though that same Jesus, 'the keystone' who was cast aside by the Jewish authorities.

Fifth Sunday of Easter, Acts of the Apostles 9:26–31

Saul, the persecutor turned Christian preacher, went to Jerusalem and was accepted by the apostles, thanks to the testimony of Barnabas. However, Saul's fiery preaching soon put his life in danger and he had to leave. After that, the local church communities enjoyed some peace while they grew, and were 'filled with the consolation of the Holy Spirit'.

Sixth Sunday of Easter, Acts of the Apostles 10:25–26, 34–35, 44–48

This passage marks a pivotal point for Peter. Luke shows that Peter was converted to the view that 'God does not play favourites', meaning that the gospel is not just for the Israelites but for 'anybody of any nationality'. This truth is confirmed when 'the Holy Spirit came down on all the listeners', Jew and Gentile alike. They are now to be united by baptism in Jesus' name.

Ascension, Acts of the Apostles 1:1–11

Following on from his Gospel, Luke tells how Jesus instructed the apostles about their future ministry. Luke begins the account of their ministry by reporting Jesus' ascension as an event experienced by the apostles who have been commissioned to be Jesus' witnesses 'to the ends of the earth'.

Acts of the Apostles

Each year, the first reading on the seven Sundays of Easter Season is taken from the *Acts of the Apostles*. Acts is usually regarded as the second volume of Luke's gospel, the story of the early Church that follows on from Luke's account of Jesus' ministry. Scholars believe it was written between 80 and 90 A.D. The author is unknown but scripture scholars believe he was an educated Greek-speaker who was not an eyewitness to Jesus' ministry. He was not a Palestinian nor, it seems, was he raised as a Jew.

At least a third of Acts consists of brief speeches put on the lips of Paul, Peter and Stephen, probably reflecting early apostolic preaching. This was a common method of history writing in the Mediterranean world.

The Structure of Acts

There are many ways to summarise key themes in this book. At a general level, we can identify the main themes as:

- Jesus' life, death and resurrection fulfil the Scriptures
- Jesus is the new David, the risen Lord of the Christian community
- The Church must become 'a light to the nations'.

Brown divides the Acts of the Apostles into four sections:

- The Risen Christ and the Restoration of Israel in Jerusalem (1:1–8:3)
- Missions in Samaria and Judea (8:4–9:43)
- The Inauguration of the Gentile Mission (10:1–15:35)
- Mission of Paul to the Ends of the Earth (15:36–28:31)

Further Reading

Raymond E Brown S.S., *Christ in the Gospels of the Liturgical Year*. Chapters 22–26: A Risen Christ in Eastertime. Liturgical Press

Raymond E Brown S.S., *An Introduction to the New Testament*. Chapter 10, The Acts of the Apostles. Doubleday

David N Freedman (ed.), *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible*. Eerdmans

Dennis Hamm S.J., *The Acts of the Apostles*. Vol 5, New Testament, New Collegeville Bible Commentary. Liturgical Press

John J Pilch, *The Cultural World of the Prophets*. The First Reading, Year by Year. Year B. Liturgical Press