

## **Second Reading, Holy Week and Easter Season : Year B, 2021**

### **Holy Week**

In Holy Week the second readings includes passages from Paul's Letter to the Philippians on Palm Sunday, Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians on Maundy Thursday, the Letter to the Hebrews on Good Friday, and Paul's Letter to the Romans during the Easter Vigil.

The readings for Holy Week focus on the suffering and death of Jesus Christ, son of Mary and Joseph and Son of God, and the meaning of his suffering and death for the salvation of all. The other major themes occur on Maundy Thursday with the institution of the Eucharist, and with the account of Jesus washing the disciples' feet, demonstrating the nature of Christian discipleship and service.

The high point of the scripture readings during Holy Week is the reading of the passion narrative. On Palm Sunday in Year B we hear the Passion according to Mark while each Good Friday we hear the Passion according to John. (The Passion according to Matthew is read in Year A, and we hear Luke's Passion in Year C.) While there are different emphases among the four gospels, particularly in John, early Christian preaching paid primary attention to Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection (Acts 2:22–24; 5:30–32) and the basic narrative was shaped very early in the formation of the Gospel.

### **Palm Sunday, Philippians 2:6–11**

In this hymn, Paul presents Jesus as a model for the Philippians to imitate, highlighting Jesus' humility and obedience to God even in death. But God loved Jesus and exalted him; the one who took on the lowly rank of slave is now, by God's commission, universal Lord.

### **Maundy Thursday, 1 Corinthians 11:23–26**

To turn the Corinthians away from local abuses, Paul reminds them of the tradition concerning the communal meal. He says the tradition is 'from the Lord', emphasising that the origin of sharing the cup and the bread is from the Lord himself. This is the earliest preserved account of the institution of the Eucharist found in scripture.

### **Good Friday, Hebrews 4:14–16.5:7–9**

Jesus is Son of God and also the 'supreme high priest' who, though sinless, knows our weakness because he was also tempted as we are. We should be confident to come to God in prayer, knowing that we approach the 'throne of grace' with Jesus as our mediator, the Son who learnt obedience through his suffering.

### **Holy Saturday, Romans 6:3–11**

Paul likens our baptism with being immersed in Jesus' death and resurrection. Our union with Jesus is such that we are at one with Him who has overcome the 'slavery of sin' through his death and resurrection. In this way we are dead to the power of sin and alive 'for God in Jesus Christ'.

### *Background to the Second Readings*

*The Letter to the Philippians* may have originally been more than one letter, written by Paul to the community he founded at the Roman colony of Philippi (in present day Macedonia), and with which he had a close personal bond. The letter includes Paul's reflections, while imprisoned in Philippi, on his suffering and on death. He also addresses internal conflicts and threats to the community while encouraging the people and thanking them for their support.

If there were originally several letters, they were likely written in the mid 50s, both from Ephesus and Corinth.

Paul's *First Letter to the Corinthians* is one of a number of letters he wrote to the community at Corinth to whom he preached the Gospel in the early 50s A.D. He wrote this letter to them from Ephesus, around 56–57 A.D., after he received disturbing news of practices, attitudes and beliefs taking hold in the community. In the letter he tackles a series of issues including community factions, sexual misbehaviour, and the questioning of Paul's authority.

*The Letter to the Hebrews* is regarded as a brilliant sermon of great literary merit. Its key point is that Christ is both the perfect sacrifice for sins and the priest who offers himself as a sacrifice; He died for us and for our sins. The author is not known but he had a sophisticated knowledge of the Old Testament in Greek and understood Jewish biblical interpretation techniques. He was probably writing to Jewish Christians, possibly in Rome, sometime from the early 50s to the late 60s in the first century A.D.

Paul's *Letter to the Romans* is the longest and the most studied of Paul's letters as it is regarded as the most important theologically. The key questions of justification and the Law are similar to those in *Galatians* but here they are more fully reasoned. Paul wrote from near Corinth about 56/57 A.D., addressing the letter mainly to Gentile Christians but with an awareness of the Jewish Christian community in Jerusalem as well. Some people in Rome knew him but he had not founded this community so his tone is cautious as he seeks to persuade his audience of the truth of his preaching to the Gentiles.

#### *Further Reading*

Raymond E Brown S.S., *Christ in the Gospels of the Liturgical Year*. Chapters 16–21: A Crucified Christ in Holy Week. Liturgical Press

Raymond E Brown S.S., *An Introduction to the New Testament*. Chapter 20, Letter to the Philippians; Chapter 22, First Letter to the Corinthians; Chapter 24, Letter to the Romans; Chapter 32, Letter to the Hebrews. Doubleday

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

Daniel J Harrington S.J., *The Letter to the Hebrews*. Vol 11, New Testament, New Collegeville Bible Commentary. Liturgical Press

Robert J Karris O.F.M., *Galatians and Romans*. Vol 6, New Testament, New Collegeville Bible Commentary. Liturgical Press

Maria A Pascuzzi, *First and Second Corinthians*. Vol 7, New Testament, New Collegeville Bible Commentary. Liturgical Press

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

Vincent M Smiles, *First Thessalonians, Philippians, Second Thessalonians, Colossians, Ephesians*. Vol 8, New 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.

On Easter Sunday the second reading is from the Letter to the Colossians. In Year B, the second readings for the five Sundays of Easter Season are taken from the First Letter of John. It is important to understand the background to these five passages from *1 John*, viz. there had been a split within the Johannine community and the writer is arguing against the beliefs and behaviours of these 'secessionists' while reinforcing the beliefs of the true followers of Christ. He does not hesitate to use strong language, calling the secessionists 'liars', 'false prophets' and 'anti-Christ's'.

In Australia, the feast of the Ascension is celebrated instead of the 7<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Easter. The second reading for the feast is taken from the Letter to the Ephesians.

### **Easter Sunday, Colossians 3:1–4**

As believers we are raised with Jesus so we should avoid being caught up in an earthly life. Baptism means we 'have died' so our thoughts should be on 'heavenly things'. The baptised share completely in the life of Christ who sits 'at God's right hand'.

### **Second Sunday of Easter, 1 John 5:1–6**

If we believe Jesus is the Christ and we truly love God, then we are 'begotten by God'. If we keep God's commandments then we will love all of God's children. There are three witnesses that verify Jesus is really Son of God—water, blood and the Spirit. This triple testimony asserts that it is powerful testimony indeed.

### **Third Sunday of Easter, 1 John 2:1–5**

Even when we sin we have Jesus as an effective advocate with the Father, achieved through Jesus' sacrifice for our sins. The writer attacks as 'liars' those who would claim to know God but do not keep His commandments, and urges us to obey the commandments so that God's love may come to perfection in us.

### **Fourth Sunday of Easter, 1 John 3:1–2**

To acknowledge the Father means that we receive love 'lavished on us' so that we can live as God's children. This is not an end in itself but a step towards a future not yet revealed, one in which the children of God 'shall be like him because we shall see him as he really is'.

### **Fifth Sunday of Easter, 1 John 3:18–24**

To counter the contention that behaviour has no consequence for those who love God, the passage stresses that love is not lip service; it means action. Believers must do what is pleasing to God — keeping the commandments, loving one another — so that we live in God and God lives in us. We know this is happening in us by the presence of the Spirit we received.

### **Sixth Sunday of Easter, 1 John 4:7–10**

'Love' occurs nine times in this passage, to emphasise that God is love, and that this love that is expressed in the life and death of Jesus which took away our sins, has consequences for all believers, each day. It is God's love for us that saves us, not our love for God.

### **Ascension of our Lord, Ephesians 4:1–13**

The shared focus of the diverse early church communities is the 'one Lord, one faith, one baptism, and one God who is Father of all ...' Just as Moses ascended Mt Sinai to receive

gifts from the Lord, Christ's ascension brings gifts to the Christian communities. The gifts are many and varied but work towards the same end, namely to build up the body of Christ and, in this way, express the unity of our faith as we grow towards full maturity in Christ.

### *Background to the First Letter of John*

The background to the three Letters of John seems to be that they were addressed to what is referred to as the 'Johannine community' composed of what are sometimes called 'house churches', with membership drawn mainly from believers who were brought up as Jews. The Gospel of John was also addressed primarily to this audience. At the time these letters were written, after the Gospel of John and probably between 100–110 A.D., the communities were facing serious division, sparked by different views of Jesus and arguments over the interpretation of John's gospel.

An anonymous presbyter or elder wrote to address these divisions caused by secessionists from the community, and to reinforce the essential elements of gospel revelation. In particular, he emphasises the importance of the incarnation, the commandment to love, the Spirit, the nature of sin, and future (eschatological) expectations in the community.

The stark contrasts between light and darkness, truth and falsehood, and love and hate, all of which characterise these letters, reflect the Fourth Gospel and its community.

The three letters are examples of *parenesis* or moral exhortation. The First Letter is like a homily, probably meant to be read out to the communities, while the short Second and Third Letters followed contemporary letter-writing conventions.

### *Structure of the Letter*

Brown proposes the following structure for this letter:

- Prologue (1:1–4)
- Part One: God is light and we must walk in light (1:5–3:10)
- Part Two: Walk as the children of the God who has loved us in Christ (3:11–5:12)
- Conclusion (5:13–21)

### *Background to the Other Readings*

The *Letter to the Colossians* sets out to repudiate some false views within the small community of Christians at Colossae. It presents Christ as the cosmic Messiah, and the Church as one worldwide body with Christ as its head. Christ reigns now, and Christians share his risen life. The letter was most likely written by someone who knew Paul's writing well. It has been dated from as early as 65 A.D. to as late as 90 A.D. Some scholars, however, think it was written by Paul or by Timothy from Rome (61–63) or Ephesus (54–56).

The *Letter to the Ephesians* has had great influence on Christian thought and theology. It is concerned with unity between Christians of Gentile and Jewish origin, with a universal church which is 'the body of Christ', and Christ's 'cosmic victory'. It is a little like an encyclical letter, intended for general distribution to the churches Paul founded rather than just for the Christians at Ephesus. The Letter relies, in part, on the *Letter to the Colossians*. While it is likely that Paul composed some of the text it was probably completed by a close disciple and admirer of Paul in Ephesus in 80–90 A.D. The writer had a detailed knowledge of *Colossians* and other Pauline letters.

*Further Reading*

Raymond E Brown S.S., *Christ in the Gospels of the Liturgical Year*. Chapters 22–26: A Risen Christ in Eastertime; Chapters 27–32: A Once-and-Coming Spirit at Pentecost. Liturgical Press

Raymond E Brown S.S., *An Introduction to the New Testament*. Chapter 12, First Epistle (Letter) of John; Chapter 27, Letter to the Colossians; Chapter 28, Epistle (Letter) to the Ephesians. Doubleday

Raymond E Brown S.S., *The Gospel and Epistles of John*. Liturgical Press

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

Scott M Lewis S.J., *The Gospel According to John and the Johannine Letters*. Vol 4, New Testament, New Collegeville Bible Commentary. Liturgical Press

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

Vincent M Smiles, *First Thessalonians, Philippians, Second Thessalonians, Colossians, Ephesians*. Vol 8, New Testament, New Collegeville Bible Commentary. Liturgical Press