

First Reading, 15th to 21st Sundays : Year B, 2021

Between the 15th and 21st Sundays, the first readings are taken from the Pentateuch or Torah (Exodus), the prophets (Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Amos); the Historical books (2 Kings and Joshua). In 2021, instead of the 19th and 20th Sundays, we celebrate the Feast of St Mary of the Cross (MacKillop) on which we read 1 Kings, and the Feast of the Assumption when we read from the New Testament book of the Apocalypse or Revelation.

Readings for Ordinary Time, Year B

Fifteenth Sunday, Amos 7:12–15

Amaziah, the priest of Bethel, attempts to silence Amos, first by reporting him to Jeroboam, King of Israel (v 10), and then by chasing him out: ‘get back to the land of Judah’. Though inexperienced, Amos does not back away. He was a shepherd and tree-dresser but now the Lord has called him to ‘prophesy to my people Israel’, to speak the word of the Lord.

Sixteenth Sunday, Jeremiah 23:1–6

In two brief oracles, Jeremiah condemns the kings of Israel (the shepherds), for their failure to lead their people. In their place, he says, the Lord will step in to re-gather his people and raise up true shepherds. The second oracle tells of the true and wise king descended from David who will rule as the Lord rules, bringing salvation to Israel and Judah.

Seventeenth Sunday, 2 Kings 4:42–44

During a famine, Elisha had already created an edible stew from poisoned gourds (2 Kgs 4:38–41). Now, from just a few barley loaves and some fresh grain and with the Lord’s direction, Elisha provides enough food for ‘a hundred men’ (symbolic of totality), with some left over. Acting with God’s power, God’s prophet provides food to alleviate the people’s suffering during famine.

Eighteenth Sunday, Exodus 16:2–4, 12–15

Having complained about the lack of water in the desert (Ex 15:22–27), the people began to complain about the lack of food. In response, the Lord tells Moses that the people will receive food in the form of quails and manna, so that they will learn that ‘I, the Lord, am your God’. Moses recognised the manna as ‘the bread the Lord gives you to eat’.

Feast of St Mary of the Cross (MacKillop), 1 Kings 17:8–16

In this, the second in a series of stories that demonstrate the Lord’s power as shown through his prophet, Elijah, the prophet asks for food and water from a widow who has almost nothing to eat because of the drought (17:1–7). Through her generous response to his invitation the word of the Lord is fulfilled. She and her household then have enough to sustain themselves until the next rains come.

Feast of the Assumption, Apocalypse 11:19, 12:1–6, 10

In this vision, John sees an unnamed woman in the heavens, adorned and radiant. The beauty of the scene is shattered when we know she is in the throes of childbirth, a traditional image of the arrival of the end time. In addition, the presence of the dragon in the vision brings with it violence and bloodshed. However, the woman and her son are protected by God, whose victory and authority are embodied in his Christ, the anointed one.

Twenty-first Sunday, Joshua 24:1–2, 15–18

Joshua brings the people together, re-telling the story of how God delivered them from Egypt and the desert (vv 2–13), and then challenging them to renew their covenant with the one

true God. The assembled people affirm their covenant and pledge to 'serve the Lord, for he is our God'.

Background to the Readings

The Book of *Amos* captures the imagination with its 'in-your-face' approach, expressed in a polished, didactic and impassioned style in this rich and literary text. The book's prophet, Amos, draws our immediate attention to corruption, hypocrisy and injustice, but with a voice of hope and encouragement towards greater social justice. There is some evidence that a prophet of that name preached in Judah and then travelled to Israel in the first half of the 8th century B.C. but scholars are unsure when this ancient text took its final form.

The book of *Jeremiah* dates the era of the prophet and priest Jeremiah quite precisely to 626 B.C., with Jeremiah active until the early stages of the Exile in 587 B.C. The book contains poetic oracles, stories about the prophet and many rhetorical questions, plus additions from those who compiled the various sources over the following centuries. Jeremiah comes across as a man of great passion using strong, sometimes shocking language, a man who suffered at the hands of the authorities for his preaching, especially against those who continued to worship other gods at various shrines. He is a model of unswerving commitment to the Lord, to his people, and to the principles of righteousness and justice.

The two books of *Kings* give a retrospective history of Israel from the birth of Samuel to the destruction of Jerusalem in 587 B.C. The books report the achievements of the kings in the northern and southern kingdoms, especially their fidelity to Yahweh.

The main focus of *1 Kings* is the attitude of Israel's kings toward the observance of the Deuteronomic law. In fact, the loyalty of the whole nation is assessed on the basis of royal behaviour. The reign of King Solomon takes up chapters 1–11, before the book moves on to tell the story of the two independent kingdoms as well as the start of Elijah's ministry as prophet, and the commissioning of Elisha after Elijah's death. The history of the book's composition remains hotly debated among scholars but it may have reached a final form sometime after the mid 6th century B.C.

The book known as *2 Kings* picks up the story of the two independent kingdoms from *1 Kings* and then recounts the history of the southern kingdom, Judah, until its destruction. The stories usually alternate between the righteous and the wicked kings. The book culminates in the reforms of Josiah, and closes with the exile into Babylon during the reign of Zedekiah. The story of the prophet Elisha is covered in Chapters 1–13.

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.).

The *Book of the Apocalypse* (also called the *Book of Revelation*), provokes reactions from both Christian and non-Christian readers—and much confusion. It is apocalyptic literature and deeply rooted in Old Testament prophetic and wisdom traditions. Apocalyptic texts often emerged at times of persecution. At the heart of this book is the call to conversion and a message of consolation in times of distress. The author was named John but he was not the apostle St John, nor the author of the Fourth Gospel, nor of the three Johannine letters. He was probably an early Jewish Christian prophet writing in the eastern Mediterranean area, and

possibly from the island of Patmos. Some scholars believe the book was written towards the end of Emperor Domitian's reign (A.D. 95–96).

Like the books of *Kings*, *Samuel* and *Chronicles*, the ***Book of Joshua*** was built up over a long time and by a complex process of editing and the merging of traditional and liturgical materials. It is part of the Deuteronomist history of God's people, Israel. It records the period after the death of Moses when Joshua led the people into Canaan, the Promised Land, with the priests bearing the Ark of the Covenant. There are bloody battles, dispossession of the Canaanites, and the capture of the city of Jericho. Joshua then divides the land among the twelve tribes. It heralds a battle over this land that continues to this day.

Further Reading

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

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

Antony F Campbell SJ, *God and Bible*. Exploring Stories from Genesis to Job. Paulist Press

Catherine A Cory, *The Book of Revelation*. Vol 12, New Testament, New Collegeville Bible Commentary. Liturgical Press

Carol J Dempsey, *Amos, Hosea, Micah, Habum, Zephaniah, Habakkuk*. Vol 15, Old Testament, New Collegeville Bible Commentary. Liturgical Press

Roland J Faley, *Joshua, Judges*. Vol 7, Old Testament, New Collegeville Bible Commentary. Liturgical Press

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

Alice L Laffey, *First and Second Kings*. Vol 9, 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

Pauline A Viviano, *Jeremiah, Baruch*. Vol 14, Old Testament, New Collegeville Bible Commentary. Liturgical Press