

## PREACHING THE SUNDAY READINGS DURING THE SYNOD

### Sunday Liturgy and the Synod October 2024

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#### Sunday 6 October

Genesis 2:18-24  
Psalm 127(128)  
Hebrews 2:9-11  
Mark 10:2-16

A man and wife become one body  
The blessing of family and children  
Jesus can help us because he is like us  
What God has united, we must not divide

#### Sunday 13 October

Wisdom 7:7-11  
Psalm 89(90)12-17  
Hebrews 4:12-13  
Mark 10:17-30

Solomon asks for wisdom  
A prayer for wisdom  
The Word of God is alive and active  
Costly discipleship

#### Sunday 20 October

Isaiah 53:10-11  
Psalm 32(33):4-5,18-20,22  
Hebrews 4:14-16  
Mark 10:35-45

The fourth Suffering Servant Song  
A covenantal prayer  
Finding grace in time of need  
The Son of Man came to serve

#### Sunday 27 October

Jeremiah 3:17-19  
Psalm 125(126)  
Hebrews 5:1-6  
Mark 10:46-52

God will guide Israel, bring the people home.  
A prayer of exile and longing  
A high priest, in the order of Melchizedek  
Go, your faith has saved you.

## (1) Sunday 6 October

Genesis 2:18-24	Man and woman become one body
Psalm 127(128)	The blessing of family and children
Hebrews 2:9-11	Jesus can help us because he is like us
Mark 10:2-16	Marriage: what God has united, we must not divide

### (i) The Gospel Background

For these reflections, inspiration will be drawn the Gospel and the corresponding Old Testament reading. A few observations about the Gospel according to Mark will not be out of place.

This year, we have been reading from the shortest (16 chapters) and the earliest Gospel (Matthew and Luke are really expanded editions). The great innovation of Mark was to write a kind of “life of Jesus,” while making use of the biographical conventions of the day. Most likely for catechetical reasons, Mark compresses the ministry of Jesus into one year, with only one Passover (followed by Matthew and Luke but notably not by John, who in this case is most likely correct historically).

The first 90 years of the emerging church have been usefully “mapped” in a sociological manner as follows:

- The period of charism (c. AD 30-60)
- The period of memory (c. AD 60-90)
- The period of institution (c. AD 90-120)

Mark wrote his text after the first generation of witnesses had all died or been killed. In itself, that was a kind of crisis. The Gospel was composed during the terrible time of the Jewish War (AD 66-74), a cataclysmic event causing destruction, mayhem and dispersal. The text of Mark was published anonymously, about the year AD 70 to 71, in nearby Syria (near the war zone, in any case; see Mark 13).

The context of writing was heavily marked by the Jewish War, the destruction of the Temple and widespread dislocation of people triggered by the War. The so-called *Pax Romana* was imposed with implacable force and ferocity. Mark’s audience was asking itself many questions.

Mark wrote for a mixed church, made up of Jews and Gentiles. There were internal tensions about how much of Jewish tradition should be maintained (see Mark 7). The external challenges were the war, the loss of the Temple and the sacrificial system. Mark does not use the word church (found in the Gospels only in Matthew). It is also quite hard to discern in Mark any ecclesial infrastructure or even basic ministries. A clue to the “church” he wrote for is given by the frequency of the word “house” and the missionary outreach. The two Greek words for house are frequent: *oikia* occurs 13 times and *oikos* occurs 18 times, yielding total of 31 occurrences. Mark evidently wrote for house churches, small conventicles of the faithful, with a strong outward or missionary impulse to bring the Good News to others.

The implied questions behind the Gospel text may be summarised as follows:

1. **Faith:** what do we believe about Jesus?

2. **Praxis:** how should we conduct ourselves as followers of Jesus?
3. **Identity:** who are we as disciples?
4. **Community:** how may the community best serve the Gospel message?
5. **Message:** what are proclaiming and how are we doing it?

Such a grid is useful for us today, as we face our own crises.

### (ii) The culture of today

Such questions of faith, practice, identity, community and message create a significant bridge to our experience today. We too are asking the very same questions. It may well be that Mark's teaching could illuminate the time and challenge the disciples today. We can see this straightaway in the confrontation about divorce.

### (iii) Reflections from today's readings

Today's first reading and Gospel might not immediately seem pertinent to the synodal process, being focused narrowly on the union of man and woman in marriage. At the same time, it is a good reminder that living the vocation of marriage is the calling of the vast majority of believers. Their experience, with all the challenges of today and the normal ups and downs of married life, must be acknowledged and affirmed. The synodal process itself has brought the voices of ordinary believers to bear on the deliberations of those attending the synod. Even more, the inclusion of up to 70 non-episcopal voting members, both men and women, will mean that the ordinary experience of grace in family and married life will be part of the discernment process. For which we give thanks.

Because Judaism allowed divorce and because early Christians also made some exceptions (Paul and Matthew being the usually cited instances), the prohibition on divorce almost certainly goes back to the historical Jesus. The prohibition has been interpreted as a kind of law but the historical Jesus did not typically "legislate". He did, however, uphold very high ideals, always in the context of human frailty and divine compassion. A good example would be the Beatitudes in Matthew 5:1-12 and also the teaching in the same chapter marked by "you have heard it said" and "but I say to you." (Matthew 5:21-48)

In the cultural context of the time, the restoration of the ideal of life-long marriage was a counter-voice to the vulnerable position of women, subject to arbitrary dismissal (the rabbis did discuss the grounds for divorce) and consequent social disgrace.

From this contextualised reading, we can learn today a few things. Firstly, Jesus was an idealist, calling those who heard him back to the original teaching and ideal of life-long fidelity in marriage. In other words, he was a radical, who did not feel bound by recent tradition, which did permit divorce, sometimes in an arbitrary way. At the same time, Jesus was not at all for imposing impossible burdens on people.

Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples, "The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses's seat; therefore, do whatever they teach you and follow it, but do not do as they do, for they do not practice what they teach. They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others, but they themselves are unwilling to lift a finger to move them. (Matthew 23:1-4)

This complex juxtaposition of idealism, realism and compassion is perhaps something we need to hear today in the wider context of the renewal of the church. The synodal voices have called for just such a negotiation of idealism, realism and compassion.

## Sunday 13 October

Wisdom 7:7-11	Solomon asks for wisdom
Psalms 89(90)12-17	A prayer for wisdom
Hebrews 4:12-13	The Word of God is alive and active
Mark 10:17-30	Costly discipleship

### (i) The Wisdom Background

The *Book of Wisdom* is an extraordinary work, of the greatest relevance at the time of writing and even again today.

The context of writing is the key to unlocking the message and our reading. The book was written about the year 30 BC, in Alexandria in Egypt, with a specific purpose in mind. At the time, the Roman Empire presented itself as an unrivalled success on different levels: the military might of Rome, the hegemony of Graeco-Roman ideals in all aspects of life, culture and education, and, finally, the imposed stability of the *Pax Romana* which permitted great economic expansion, bringing wealth to the few and exploitation of the many. The propaganda of the Empire presented itself explicitly as God-given, part of the divine order of things, which could never be surpassed and which ought not ever to be opposed.

It would have been easy for young Jews living in Alexandria to conclude that not only was Rome “right” in military, cultural and commercial terms, but *also in religion*. It seems from the *Book of Wisdom*, that some young Jews, perhaps many, had walked away from their ancestral traditions, drawn by the brilliance and sheer dominance of the culture around them. The Wisdom of Solomon is explicitly directed to such young people. In a subtle and flexible way, the writer uses the culture itself (Greek language, rhetoric and philosophy) precisely to counter the culture and show the ultimate emptiness of its presuppositions. The youngsters were looking for something good (a spirituality and a life-wisdom) *outside the faith*. The youngsters should have realised that Hellenistic culture, for all its brilliance and supremacy, could not deliver what they were looking for because that culture was solidly based on the false and absurd premises of false and absurd gods and goddesses. If only the youngsters looked at their own inheritance, when properly presented as in the Book of Wisdom, they would see that what they were seeking abroad was to be found all along at home.

In other words, true wisdom is to be found in God, in the exalted monotheism of the ancient Jewish faith. Hence the prayer of Solomon, our first reading. The Responsorial Psalm is particularly suited to the reading.

The Gospel reading adds an extra edge to the teaching of the first reading. Already from the Book of Wisdom, we learn that faith is counter-cultural. The gospel reading tells us just how counter-cultural. In the time of Jesus, individuals could attach themselves to a revered rabbi or scribe, hoping to learn as much as possible, about the Torah and its application to life. Becoming a disciple, in the Christian vision, resembles that but it is nevertheless significantly different. First of all, there is no gospel story of someone presenting him/herself successfully as a disciple *on their own initiative*. Jesus chose his followers not the other way round, as remembered in the much later “You did not choose me, but I chose you” (John 15:16). Secondly, while Jesus does of course offer a teaching and a wisdom, being a disciple of his means not only listening to his teaching

but being attached to him and to his destiny in a way which is much more personal way and, in the event, a much more costly discipleship.

### (ii) The culture of today

Even in a highly secularised culture, the “hungers of the heart” do not simply go away but emerge and re-emerge in different, sometimes unexpected ways. We do live in a culture of distraction, where possessions or sheer being busy can serve to shut out the deeper longings. Nevertheless, many of our contemporaries feel these deeper longings and find themselves drawn to meditation, yoga, Buddhism, even to more (c)overtly Christian projects such as the Camino de Santiago. Our job, in our day, to help people acknowledge such “restlessness” of heart (St Augustine) and to invited them to The Way, the trusted path not only to direction and meaning but also to deep personal happiness in Christian discipleship. Sometimes, we have to go abroad so as to come home.

### (iii) Reflections from today’s readings

The Synodal Pathway is both new and not new at the same time. It is new is that a very different way of being church is gradually emerging. The buzz words are listening and discernment. For that, we all need wisdom – not just any wisdom but the wisdom which comes from God. We read about such wisdom in the Letter of St James:

But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy. And the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace. (James 3:17-18)

The first step is inner conversion of heart, a disposition which truly seeks not what I want but God wants for us, for the community of faith. Good listening to each other depends on suspending my agenda and listening to others and discerning with others. The second second step is genuine prayer from the heart. We need to pray, just as Solomon prayed in the first reading, for “the wisdom from above”. Any other wisdom might just be group dynamics or political games but not the wisdom we truly need.

The Synodal Pathway is at the same *not* new. It is really a continuation of the Second Vatican Council, long delayed. The project of that Council was a positive dialogue with the world and contemporary culture as we find it right now. That Council was solidly grounded in the Word of God and offered the world the Good News, the proclamation of Jesus and the proclamation about Jesus.

Recent papal teaching has continued such proclamation in an exceptionally clear way. For example, Pope Benedict XVI wrote in his first encyclical:

Being Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction. (God is Love, §1)

In a more personal and less academic way, Pope Francis, in his first Apostolic Exhortation, as follows:

I invite all Christians, everywhere, at this very moment, to a renewed personal encounter with Jesus Christ, or at least an openness to letting him encounter them; I ask all of you to do this unfailingly each day. No one should think that this

invitation is not meant for him or her, since “no one is excluded from the joy brought by the Lord” (The Joy of the Gospel §3)

The Synodal Pathway cannot be first of all about the church as institution (a “meeting about meetings”). Instead, it must be first of all about the Gospel, the proclamation of Jesus and the proclamation about Jesus, in words which our contemporaries can understand and engage with. Only then can we go on to ask an important but secondary question: how should we, the people of God, organise ourselves so as best to serve the Gospel vision? How should we be as church so that the Gospel shines through us? Only by putting things in this correct order, will we be free to let the Spirit take us where it will.

## Sunday 20 October

Isaiah 53:10-11	The fourth Suffering Servant Song
Psalms 32(33):4-5, 18-20, 22	A covenantal prayer
Hebrews 4:14-16	Finding grace in time of need
Mark 10:35-45	The Son of Man came to serve

### (i) The Isaiah Background

The well-known four Suffering Servant Songs take pride of place in the Holy Week liturgy. Giving these poems such a high profile reflects their importance in the New Testament. Almost every New Testament book cites or alludes to these poems. The very earliest Christians, facing the unexpected paradox of the cross, found in them resources for understanding what happened for us in Jesus' death and resurrection.

However, before looking at their use in the New Testament, it is enlightening to ask what they could possibly have meant at the time of writing. Commonly, Isaiah 40-55 is regarded as Second Isaiah, written towards the end of the Babylonian Exile (587-539 BC). In the four poems, the servant seems to refer at times to an individual, presumably the prophet himself, and at other times to the people as such, using the word servant.

The key may be this. The prophet poet has been asked to live the bitter experience of the Exile in an exemplary way, so as to help the people undergo the period of suffering as a period of grace, a time of conversion. The prophet suffers "on behalf of" the people – but not *instead* of them but rather *for* them so they, in turn, may learn how to live the destructive experience in a life-giving way. A lot to ask of both parties, of course.

Such an understanding can help us today to approach the suffering of Jesus on our behalf. There are similarities and differences. Jesus' suffering is also on our behalf, again not in the sense of taking the punishing due to us, as traditionally understood (substitutionary atonement). As St Paul teaches, Jesus' suffering is an example of faithfulness and a disclosure of the extraordinary faithfulness of God to broken humanity, a true act of service. We see this clearly enough in a few verses from Romans,

But now apart from the law the righteousness of God (although it is attested by the law and the prophets) has been *disclosed*— namely, the righteousness of God through the *faithfulness* of Jesus Christ for all who believe. (Romans 3:21-22 NET)

But Jesus' suffering is more than exemplary. His faithfulness has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit given to us. We have more than his example...rather, we can make our own his journey on the cross into resurrection. This means, we can now live by the very faithfulness of Jesus, as St Paul writes,

I have been crucified with Christ, and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me. So the life I now live in the body, I live because of the faithfulness of the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. (Galatians 2:20 NET)

Such Pauline teaching links closely with the Gospel today,

“Instead whoever wants to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first among you must be the slave of all. For even the Son of



Man did not come to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” (Mark 10:43-45)

In other words, Jesus’ death was an act of loving service. He is our “Suffering Servant” who sets for us the example of service “to the point of death” (Philippians 2:8), disclosing the heart of salvation as service and putting service at the dead centre of Christian living.

### **(ii) The culture of today**

In our time, the naked exercise of power is evident and harmful. We see this clearly on the global stage, with tragic consequences for ordinary people, who would like to live ordinary life in peace. We see it also in social media, manipulating fear and setting fire to hatred and division. It even happens within families, where different kinds of abuse are really exercises in naked power with terrible consequences.

On the other hand, we see around us as well wonderful kindness and generosity, especially in young people, often concerned about social inequality, injustice and climate change. In spite of the evil around us, there is much goodness in people and in our world.

Our core Gospel message is one of service, loving service, discipleship costing not less than everything, on the model of Jesus’ own ministry and destiny. Our task today is to get out that message, so as to counter the naked exercise of power and to affirm and support the goodness and kindness we see around us. We need to get out the message that loving service is the paradoxical path to well-being and happiness.

### **(iii) Reflections from today’s readings**

In our diocese, the Building Hope programme underlined a change of style, or in reality, a change of substance, in the church. The buzz words this time are servant leadership. The same call for a servant church is heard just as loudly in the various reports of the Synodal Pathway. In other words, the time has come for a servant church. As one French bishop put it rather sharply, “a church which does not serve, serves for nothing.”

While we may be caught up in the energy and excitement of change, we should not forget just how hard a task this is going to be. The institutional church has long walked in the corridors of power, both on the world stage and within the institution. A local example may help. When the Irish Catholic Church enjoyed the uncritical support of society at large, it often exercised its power in a manner at variance with today’s Gospel reading. Jesus did say explicitly, “This is not to happen among you.” But often it did happen among us! This doesn’t mean we should lose heart, but rather keep in mind the magnitude of the change envisaged.

Servant leadership has at least two dimensions, the first of which is deeply pastoral. The church, the community of faith, those with pastoral responsibility are called to be of service to the community of faith and to the wider world. In the phrase of Pope Francis, that means “smelling the sheep”, standing by all in need, whatever the reason. Of course this is *not* new: we already have many services in our parishes, such as the SVP or various forms of counselling etc. What is new is that this should be not just the practical

extension of church but the very substance of who we are, the mark of all we do. Naturally such a change of mindset will take up time to bed down.

The second dimension of servant leadership takes us to the heart of what happened for us in Jesus' death and resurrection. Again, St Paul can help. In his day, the bearers of the Gospel had *to be the Gospel*, so that those who heard it could also have a tangible experience of what it meant. This is what lies behind the challenging, even alarming theme across the letters: be imitators of me as I am of Christ (1 Cor 4:16; 11:1; Phil 3:17; 1 Thess 1:6; 2:14), *in that order!* How else would Paul's pagan hearers know that his message was for real?

Our situation today is not dissimilar. The bearers of the Gospel in our time must *be the Gospel* to those they serve. Otherwise, how will people know it is for real? It means that as individuals and as community of faith (= church), we have to show people the love, the service, the faithfulness which marked the person, teaching and destiny of Jesus himself. Again, this is not exactly *new*. The priest, for example, was traditionally referred to as an *alter Christus*, another Christ. What is new is that must be the mark of every member of the community and the mark of how the church is a servant church in all its dimensions. That would indeed be revolutionary. It is also exactly what is needed today. Such a shift would be prophetic, challenging to the abuse of power, affirmative to those already living the values of the Gospel.

## Sunday 27 October

Jeremiah 3:17-19	God will guide Israel, bring the people home.
Psalms 125(126)	A prayer of exile and longing
Hebrews 5:1-6	A high priest, in the order of Melchizedek
Mark 10:46-52	Go, your faith has saved you.

### (i) The Jeremiah Background

The great exegete Walter Brueggemann distinguishes two “systems”: the royal system and the prophetic system. Those in power promote the royal system of reassurance because it leaves their position of power and exploitation undisturbed. The prophets, by contrast, are called to tell the truth, to name the exploitation, to give God’s perspective on what is happening, to call to conversion of heart and life. In times of apparent well-being, prophets denounce and promise gloom. In time of suffering and hardship, the promise hope and relief. This is not just because prophets were awkward, contrary creatures! The prophets often try to break through the deafening noise of the conventional wisdom to speak a life-changing word of truth. It can’t have been easy to have been a prophet, a Jeremiah regularly complained. Neither was it easy to pay attention to such contrary voices. In times of prosperity, it was not at all easy to listen to them and to “hear” them. Likewise, in times of hardship, the word of hope must have been especially difficult to hear.

When we read today’s first reading in the context of the time, it sheds light on our time too. The words of Jeremiah were delivered just before the capture and destruction of Jerusalem. We can imagine the feeling of inevitable defeat and deportation, the feeling of sheer dread before the inexorable final onslaught. Into that deep darkness, the prophet speaks a contrary word of light, a message of great hope and even joy.

The Lord says this:  
 Shout with joy for Jacob!  
 Hail the chief of nations!  
 Proclaim! Praise! Shout:  
 ‘The Lord has saved his people,  
 the remnant of Israel!’

How impossible it must have seemed at the time! And yet, they did return and God did bring them safely home.

### (ii) The culture of today

We live at a time of the greatest anxiety – climate, war, politics, migration – a time when it is easy to be stressed and disheartened. As a Church we try to live in real world and that sense of worldly grief can affect us too. As Paul teaches,

For sadness as intended by God produces a conversion that leads to salvation, leaving no regret, but worldly sadness brings about death. (2 Corinthians 7:10)

As a church, we are undergoing a long period of what we may call ecclesiastical recession or rather purification. One way of being church is disappearing (it wasn’t all joy and light anyway, as we have sadly learned). We all know the symptoms and signs and they require no detailed rehearsal. We also know the feeling of helplessness, lack of

direction and the sheer not knowing what will be the future. Even the great hope engendered by the Synodal Pathway can seem more a mirage than a real destination.

### (iii) Reflections from today's readings

Now is the time to listen to the word of Jeremiah in our time, hard and all as it may be to hear. The conventional narrative is one of inevitable, inexorable decline, accompanied by feelings helplessness and worldly gloom. Jeremiah, were he alive today, would literally shout at us: God will never abandon his people or his project of the Good News in Jesus. In the words of Jesus at the end of Matthew's Gospel: "And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age." (Matthew 28:20) There is much to be done and much to be changed. But nothing will ever "separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Romans 8:39). The church has always been evolving, letting go of what seemed at one time essential and discovering new ways to respond to the God. Here, history is the great teacher. The time of apparent crisis has always the time of opportunity.

Bartimaeus can teach us to regain our sight. He knew he was blind. He took the initiative of approaching Jesus. He named his hope. The moments of the conversation are worth pondering:

"What do you want me to do for you?"

"Rabbi, let me see again."

"Go, your faith has healed you."

Jesus poses the same question to us today on our Synodal Pathway: What do you want me to do for you? Could there be a better question? In our spiritual conversations, we are asked to name our need(s). In spite of all the differences among us, all of us in the church want the Gospel project to be alive again, to become a source of life for all. We may have different ways of seeing how that may come about, but there is surely commonality and communion in the basic desire for the Gospel to come alive in our time. As we put words on our hopes, we are also asked to turn to the Lord himself in need: "Rabbi, Lord Jesus, let me, let us see again." If we keep grounding ourselves in the Word and in the Spirit, we may avoid falling into the trap of "parliamentarianism", a distraction from the authentic path of discernment and communion. Then we may hear the wonderful words, "Go, your faith has healed you." Then we may join Bartimaeus as he followed Jesus on The Way (not "on the road", as in most translations).