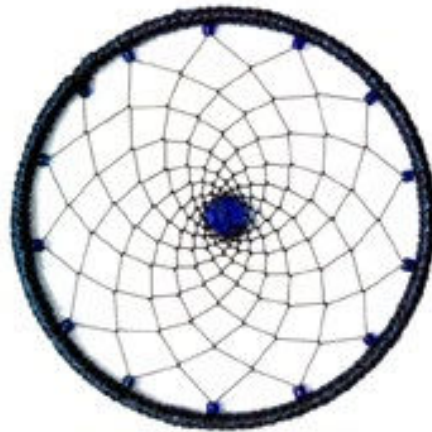


# the Sunday Readings



## The Birth of the Ecological Age

*Then the Spirit said:  
“Let life entwine the land and sea  
In the web of its community.  
Let its power move human hearts  
To mend the world they’ve torn apart,  
And sing with every leaf and stone  
This is our Earth. This is our home.”*

**25<sup>th</sup> Sunday Ordinary Time (b)**  
**Season of Creation / Week 4**

# 25<sup>th</sup> Sunday Ordinary Time (b)

the Season of Creation continues <sup>1</sup>

***Jesus came to serve***

## introduction

The readings this Sunday give a sense of the destructive power of passions, divisions, jealousies, greed, and competition, both for people and, in this *Season of Creation*, for Earth itself and all Earth's inhabitants! This destructive power contrasts with what James calls '*the Wisdom from above*' – wisdom that embraces the importance of turning our competitive energies to serve the least among us and creation, of which we are a part.<sup>2</sup>

first reading: Wisdom 2 : 12, 17 – 20<sup>3</sup>

[ the testing of the righteous ]

*"Let us lie in wait for the righteous man, because he is inconvenient to us and opposes our actions; he reproaches us for sins against the law, and accuses us of sins against our training.(12) . . . Let us see if his words are true, and let us test what will happen at the end of his life;(17) for if the righteous man is God's child, he will help him, and will deliver him from the hand of his adversaries.(18) Let us test him with insult and torture, so that we may find out how gentle he is, and make trial of his forbearance.(19) Let us condemn him to a shameful death, for, according to what he says, he will be protected."*(20)

The wisdom writer has in mind the suffering of the just, faithful Israelites, living in Alexandria,<sup>4</sup> who were the objects of mockery and persecution by renegade Israelites and hostile non-Israelites. These *just-but-suffering ones*, symbolise the whole Israelite people. Their opponents find them offensive and obnoxious because they feel threatened by the scrutiny of these upright and just ones. The opposition explain their scheme as, "*putting the righteous ones to the test*" (v.17). They want to test their relationship to God; their personal courage; and probably their belief in immortality (vv.18-20).<sup>5</sup> They tell themselves, "*if the just one be the son of God, God will defend him*" (v.18).

1 Cover Image: from the Creation Mandala – poem and art work by Fr. Vincent Busch SSC, subanencrafts.com.

2 See *Jm.3:17*. Modern disciples stand in the same tradition as the anonymous '*Just One*' of *the Book of Wisdom*. They stand in the same line as, '*the Powerless Innocent*' of today's gospel passage. Modern-day eco-heroes who suffer for their faith in God's creation, are part of the same honourable tradition.

3 The biblical excerpts are drawn from the New Oxford Annotated Bible, New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), published by Oxford University Press (1994).

4 circa 50 b.c.e.

5 The idea of the suffering, just one was well-known in Israelite tradition. It seems to have had a great influence on the early Christians as they tried to understand the sufferings and death of Jesus. By faithfulness to *the Torah (Law of Moses)* in such an unfavourable climate, the wisdom writer discerns a new, "*Word from the Lord*" in the vulnerability of *the faithful Just One* who will be the agent of God's creative power and newness.

**Psalm 54 : 1 – 4, 6**

[ prayer for vindication ]

*Save me, O God, by your name,  
and vindicate me by your might.(1)  
Hear my prayer, O God;  
give ear to the words of my mouth.(2)  
For the insolent have risen against me,  
the ruthless seek my life;  
they do not set God before them.(3)  
But surely, God is my helper;  
the Lord is the upholder of my life.(4) . . .  
With a freewill offering I will sacrifice to you;  
I will give thanks to your name, O Lord, for it is good.(6)*

The speaker begins a bold lament by addressing complaints to the Lord, but ends with an expression of grateful trust. The main argument is that a person who *fears the Lord* (a person who keeps the Torah) will be happy. Faithful obedience leads to well-being. A steady heart is not shattered by adversity. The lament is a filing of complaint before the Lord's throne (v.3), where the speaker insists that things are not right. The speaker won't accept the present conditions because they are intolerable. The fact that things aren't right isn't the psalmist's fault. As the covenant partner, the Lord has the obligation to put it right again!

On the speaker's part, that's pretty robust faith in the power of the Lord God to bring new life. The lament is a cry of desperation, understood as an act of faithfulness. The trusting is based on assumptions of the way the world is supposed to be – and yet is not. The speech acknowledges that the people's destiny is in the Lord's hands. Although helpless the psalmist doesn't doubt that the Lord God can and may transform the situation. There's enough confidence to address God. The confidence ends in grateful trust. Not only has the situation been transformed, but the speaker's relationship with the Lord has been reaffirmed and cemented (v.6). The lament reflects the divine liturgy – where the Lord proves to be faithful and powerful. Hopeless situations are transformed when the Lord God acts. Lament enables the trusting ones to read their situation of hurt, as that of potential transformation.

**second reading: James 3 : 16 – 4 : 3**

[ wisdom from above contrasted with the way of the world ]

*For where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind.(16) 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.(17) And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace.(18) . . . Those conflicts and disputes among you, where do they come from? Do they not come from your cravings that are at war within you?(4:1) You want something and do not have it; so you commit murder. And you covet something and*

*cannot obtain it; so you engage in disputes and conflicts. You do not have, because you do not ask.(2) You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, in order to spend what you get on your pleasures.(3)*

James asks the Christian disciple to discern when legitimate debate crosses over the line and degenerates into contentiousness, by looking at the persons involved. Are they jealous and selfishly ambitious? Or are they pure, peaceful, gently, open to reason, merciful, full of good acts, simple and sincere? Contentiousness and passions show themselves in life within the Christian community as well as in society-at-large. James challenges his readers to look to the source of conflict in the Christian community and in society. He urges discernment to determine whether true wisdom (heavenly), or false wisdom (earthly), motivates the person who claims to be wise (vv.16-18).

James urges a discernment of spirits in order to determine whether heavenly wisdom or earthly wisdom is behind the person who claims to be wise.<sup>6</sup> Because the human heart is divided, there have been endless conflicts, wars and rivalries through the centuries. When people let themselves be taught by God and pray, they become the peacemakers; the pure of heart of the Beatitudes.

James' letter warns of the destructiveness of selfish competitive patterns of action.<sup>7</sup> The global economy is structured on competition that drives consumption and requires constant economic growth on a planet with limited resources. Those economic systems, structures and patterns of living are also the drivers of growing inequality around Earth that promise increasing social crises and conflict. The competitive structures of the global economy are aggravating what Pope Francis has described as one complex and interrelated global crisis.<sup>8</sup>

**gospel reading: Mark 9 : 30 – 37**

[ Jesus again foretells his dying and rising ]

*They went on from there and passed through Galilee. Jesus did not want anyone to know it;(30) for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, "The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again."(31) But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him.(32) Then they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked them, "What were you arguing about on the way?"(33) But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest.(34) He sat down, called the Twelve, and said to them, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all."(35) Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them,(36)*

6 *Jm.4:1 'cravings'* – the Greek word here (literally, "pleasures") does not indicate that pleasure is evil. Rather, as the text points out (vv.2-3), it is the manner in which one deals with needs and desires that determines good or bad. The motivation for any action can be wrong, especially if one does not pray properly but seeks only selfish enjoyment (v.3).

7 Those are the behaviours that Pope Francis identified in *Laudato Si'* as driving the destructive dynamics now threatening the life of the planet, including the human community.

8 *Laudato Si'* #70.

*“Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.”(37)*

Galilee had been the scene of frequent revolts and guerrilla fighting. Armed resistance was possible there because Roman control was minimal. However, to go up to Jerusalem was walking defenceless into the power of the enemy. Jesus' messianic strategy clearly differs from the Zealot ambitions of his disciples. Jesus constantly crossed beyond the borders of Palestine. When he asked his disciples what they were arguing about on the way as they moved through Galilee, the Twelve were too embarrassed to admit they were competing among themselves to be recognised which of them was the greatest (v.34).<sup>9</sup> He tells them to channel their competitive energies into service, individually and as a community, to the least (both in creation and human community) in times of crisis and need (v.35).

The disciples are shocked at Jesus' announcing that *God's power for life-giving* takes the form of death; that real well-being and victory only appear via death (v.32). This is the assumption that Peter made earlier; the assumption which Jesus rejected, telling Peter that he was thinking not as God does, but as humans do.<sup>10</sup> This announcement dismantles the dominant understanding of power. It asserts that all such would-be power is in reality no power at all. Jesus thus dismisses every self-serving form of power upon which human empires are based.

Then, as well as in our own time, there were political movements, that could seem revolutionary. In reality they were not. Rather, it was the domination of one group or class over others and the Israelites over other nations. The disciples were considering their position in this new order – a line of thinking consistent with a Zealot-type messianism. But Jesus was talking of *a new reigning of God* that his practise had already begun to establish – in the valuing of sharing; in the valuing of use over against the valuing of exchange; in the assertion that the reigning of God wasn't limited to the Israelites! Then Jesus does something very revolutionary: he puts a child in front of them and says the child is the most important person in God's ordering (v.37). Its as if he had put a slave in front of them and told them to welcome the slave into their household – unheard of!<sup>11</sup>

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9 Will our efforts deepen our personal and community ecological spirituality? Can they help to free us from the competitive dynamics driving climate change and social conflict? How can we nurture growth in mutual service, simplicity of life, and the true wisdom *“full of mercy and good fruits”* that will bring the change and healing Earth we so urgently need?

10 Cf. *Mk.8:31ff* Hearing this in *the Season of Creation* raises a disturbing question. If God does not intervene to save God's beloved sons or daughters from suffering and death, could it be that God will not protect Earth either, no matter how precious it is, from the destructive effects of humanity's actions? And what of Earth herself? The warnings of scientists about the devastation that would come from the dangerous tipping points in the near future because of climate change, press that question upon us. From what we are already seeing in more devastating storms, heat waves, droughts, fires, floods, the looming threat of dramatic sea level rise, the increasing frequency of extinctions of species globally, and the continuing dangerous rise of average annual global temperatures, there is no denying that the risks and threats are real.

Like Moses before him,<sup>12</sup> Jesus' announcement, that *the Human one (Son of man)* would suffer, dismantles the claims of the dominant powers. These claims, implicit in the dreams of the disciples are replaced by Jesus' full trust in the God of Justice and Freedom. The dominant powers that fail to bring life are dismantled by this appeal to the God who brings Life. But could Earth be facing what Jesus was trying to teach his apostles in the gospel: "*I will be handed over to people who will kill me?*"<sup>13</sup>

Jesus' messianic strategy wouldn't find acceptance among the disciples.<sup>14</sup> The evangelist knows Jesus will be murdered (v.31). Jesus would bring all people together – but only after his death. Jesus speaks of an immediate resurrection. In biblical language, '*three days after*' does not mean literally three days later. It means very soon afterwards, or right away. Mark probably intends this incident and the sayings that follow as a commentary on the disciples' lack of understanding (v.32). Their role in Jesus' work is one of service, especially to the poor and lowly (vv.33-37).

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11 In the language of Jesus and also in other ancient languages, people used the same word for '*servant*' as for '*child*'.

12 See *Ex.8:16*.

13 Hearing this in the Season of Creation raises a disturbing question. If God does not intervene to save God's beloved sons or daughters from suffering and death, could it true that God will not protect Earth either, no matter how precious it is, from the destructive effects of humanity's actions? God certainly does not protect people from the suffering and death of martyrs for faith. Cf. *Mk.8:27-35* "*If the just one be the son of God, God will defend him.*" This is the assumption that Peter made in last Sunday's gospel, the assumption which Jesus rejected, telling Peter that he was thinking not as God does but as humans do". In the remnants of vast lost civilizations of the past, there is evidence that Earth has and could again endure vast and terrible deaths. There's also evidence that Earth can rise again but '*resurrections*' etched in our planetary history after major extinctions, takes thousands and tens of thousands; if not millions of years. The severity of the various dimensions and impacts of the changing climate express Earth's great cry for help. This goal invites action to protect Earth for the wellbeing of all who make it home. The type of service work coming out of this Sunday's reflection certainly should include continuing and deepening our conversion towards *Laudato Si's goal of an Ecological Spirituality*.

14 Certainly not among the Sadducees; the powerful and wealthy priestly party. Nor among the Pharisees; the traditionalist religious party of the urban middle class. Both groups felt a deep scorn, even hatred, for the poor and therefore harboured scorn and hatred for Jesus' cause.

**for sharing:**<sup>15</sup>

- *The testing of the righteous. Comment on Wisdom 2 : 12, 17 – 20*
- *Wisdom from above, in contrast with the way of the world. Comment on James 3 : 16 – 4 : 3*
- *Jesus again foretells his dying and rising. Comment on Mark 9 : 30 – 37*

**prayer:**<sup>16</sup>

*Triune Lord,  
wondrous community of infinite love,  
teach us to contemplate You  
in the beauty of the universe,  
for all things speak of You.  
Awaken our praise and thankfulness  
for every being You have made.  
God of love, show us our place in this world  
as channels of Your love  
for all the creatures of the Earth,  
for not one of them is forgotten in Your sight.  
Enlighten those who possess power and money  
that they may avoid the sin of indifference,  
that they may love the common good, advance the weak,  
and care for this world in which we live.  
The poor and the Earth are crying out.  
O Lord, seize us with Your power and light,  
help us to protect all life,  
to prepare for a better future,  
for the coming of Your Kingdom,  
of justice, peace, love and beauty.  
Praise be to You! Amen.*

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15 Lectio Divina: reading God's Word in a moment of prayer and allowing it to enlighten and renew us: The practise of *lectio divina* requires a quiet space, a passage of scripture and the willingness to give time to the project. The passage used should be short. For the purpose of this leaflet, we suggest using the gospel reading of the up-coming Sunday. There are four steps in the traditional practise of *lectio divina*. The steps don't have to have the following order: *lectio* (*reading*) – read the passage of Scripture read slowly - more than once. If a particular word, phrase, or sentence seems significant (even if you don't know why) you may want to write it down. *meditatio* (*reflection*) – let the significant words fill your mind without straining to analyse them. We are in God's presence and so let the Holy Spirit lead your understanding of the words. *oratio* (*prayer*) – allow your heart to speak to God, in words inspired by the passage of Scripture, or by the thoughts that have come to you, while reflecting on it. *contemplatio* (*rest*) – let go of ideas and words and allow yourself to rest in the presence of God, in simple and wordless contemplation. This leaflet gives the context and some commentary on each of the readings and the psalm used in the Sunday's liturgy. Familiarity with the texts and the commentary beforehand, can better prepare our hearing and understanding the passages in our worship. Whatever our preparation for doing this exercise and whatever questions we may use to break open the passage, we must be conscious of Christ's promise: *'Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them'*

16 The prayer that concludes the Lectio Divina is ICEL's 1998 opening prayer from the Proper of the Day. These prayers draw upon the concrete and vivid images of Scripture and conclude with a clearly focused petition inspired by the readings.

**review**<sup>17</sup>

*We believe in God who births all created things, renews all things, and cherishes all things with love. We believe in God, who nearly 4.5 billion years ago began to form Earth, who patiently evolved Earth as a nurturing home for all creatures, all members of the Earth family. We believe in God, who opens the ears and frees the tongues of those called to protect and care for Earth as servants of the New Creation among us in these times.*

*We believe in Jesus, God become flesh and blood, a human part of Earth, who lived and breathed and spoke among us, who accepted rejection, suffering and death on a cross, a faithful witness to God's call to loving care for all human beings and healing restoration for all creation. We believe Jesus, the risen Christ, who is inviting us to the greatness of service, evolving the New Creation.*

*We believe in the Holy Spirit, offering the peaceable, gentle Wisdom of God among us; who is working now among us to deepen in all peoples a spirit of solidarity dedicated to service of all for the renewal of Earth as a nurturing home for all.*

*This is our faith. Through it we see God's revelation emerging in new ways among us. Through it we embrace the promise of God's saving love and our mission to restore the household of creation. Amen.*

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<sup>17</sup> **the review:** – at the end of each reflection the review examines one of the themes of the readings, usually drawn from the gospel, and provides an opportunity to check our own performance, in the light of the Word and Eucharist that we have previously heard and experienced.