

## Readings and Commentary 24 OT Year A

**Celebration Summary: Bryan M. Cones:** Today's liturgy confronts us with one of the most difficult challenges of discipleship: forgiveness, not once, not twice, but as God forgives. On this Sunday nearest the anniversary of the attacks of September 11, with wars related to that day of sorrow still smoldering, and as we hear of further attacks in other parts of the world, God's challenge of mercy is great indeed. "Wrath and anger are hateful things, yet the sinner hugs them tight." The beginning of the first reading could almost suffice for today's whole liturgy of the word, if not for Jesus' further demand that we forgive "not seven times but seventy-seven times." Though Sirach warns us to "remember" our last days, when our own faults will be recounted in detail, how can we forgive those who have done great violence? Indeed, how can the poor and forgotten of the world forgive those who burden them with injustice? It is indeed only by God's grace that such a thing is possible. Only God is "the source of our peace" (alternative opening prayer); war can never bring us true safety. As if acknowledging this, the communion antiphon cries out: "O God, how much we value your mercy! All [humanity] can gather under your protection." It is best not to ignore the harsh coincidence of today's liturgy and this painful anniversary. Let the church raise in prayer terrorism's victims, its perpetrators, and the world's nations and leaders, that the Holy Spirit may truly "guide and direct us" in God's way (prayer after Communion)

**Lectionary Summary: Glenn CJ Byer:** The Scriptures for this Sunday revolve around the concepts of forgiveness, God's great mercy and the criteria for us to receive forgiveness and reconciliation. The Book of Sirach dates from the second century before Christ. The book was not accepted into the Hebrew Bible and as a result, the original Hebrew text was not preserved in the Jewish canon. It is a collection of ethical teachings. In the reading from Sirach, the listener is challenged to forgive the injustice meted out by a neighbor, so that when he/she prays, one's own sin will be forgiven. Wrath and anger will keep a sinner bound in negativity. Forgiveness will allow the person to be free and open not only to God's mercy and forgiveness, but also be a better member of society. Sirach points out that revenge is never the path for the righteous, rather forgiveness. Paul's letter to the Romans, written in the 50's is a "developed theology of the gospel of justification and salvation of Jew and Greek alike by the grace of God through faith in Jesus Christ, revealing uprightness and love of God the Father." (J. Fitzmyer) In the short passage today, Paul reminds us that we live totally "for the Lord." Christ came, to be both the Lord of

the dead and the living. This is part of a larger segment of the epistle in which Paul outlines how we are all called and challenged to live under the grace of God, come to us in Jesus Christ. Matthew's Gospel presents one of the more challenging calls to forgiveness in the New Testament. This is immediately preceded by the case of how to treat an unrepentant church member. The call to forgive seventy times seven times, emphasizes the point that Christians have no right to place any limit on forgiveness. Forgive as often as it is necessary. The parable of the unjust steward reinforces the message. The actions of the king in the parable liken him to the action of God. The king demands a reckoning and shows great mercy in writing off the debt. This same servant, when confronting a fellow debtor, showed no such mercy and thus was subject to a harsh judgment. The story warns us that the forgiveness granted by God will be revoked unless we are willing to forgive others. The unforgiving person is excluded from God's mercy. Those who wish to receive God's mercy must show mercy toward others.

### **First Reading** Sirach 27:30 - 28:7

*Forgive your neighbor's injustice; then when you pray, your own sins will be forgiven.*

### **A reading from the Book of Sirach**

Wrath and anger are hateful things,  
yet the sinner hugs them tight.  
The vengeful will suffer the LORD's vengeance,  
for he remembers their sins in detail.  
Forgive your neighbor's injustice;  
then when you pray, your own sins will be forgiven.  
Could anyone nourish anger against another  
and expect healing from the LORD?  
Could anyone refuse mercy to another like himself,  
can he seek pardon for his own sins?  
If one who is but flesh cherishes wrath,  
who will forgive his sins?  
Remember your last days, set enmity aside;  
remember death and decay, and cease from sin!  
Think of the commandments, hate not your neighbor;  
remember the Most High's covenant, and overlook faults.

### **The word of the Lord**

**Commentary: Sirach 27:30 - 28:7 by Deacon Owen Cummings:**

There are two teachers named Jesus in our readings today: Jesus ben Sira, who lived during the third and early second centuries BCE, and Jesus of Nazareth. The book of the first Jesus was written at a time of great cultural and religious turmoil in Judaism. It is after the time of Alexander the Great, and his monumental project of making the entire world Greek in culture and civilization is well under way. This is known as Hellenization. The Hellenization of Jewish culture and religion was part of this policy. Jesus ben Sira is utterly opposed to any compromise with Greek culture. The Jewish faith must stand on its own, its purity must not be tainted, and Jews must stand up for their faith. Not all Jews agreed. Some, perhaps desirous of modern ways, saw in Hellenization an opportunity for progress. Judaism was, at least in some degree, polarized. And yet, this Jesus ben Sira, anticipating almost verbally at times Jesus of Nazareth, is insistent that there must be forgiveness of one's neighbor, even if one is locked in disagreement. There must be no hatred of neighbor, of one's fellows, even if one suspects them of compromising the faith. "Should a man refuse mercy to his fellows, yet seek pardon for his own sins?" There is a timeliness in Jesus ben Sira's message for our American Catholic Church.

**Responsorial Psalm Psalm 103:1-2, 3-4, 9-10, 11-12**

**R(8)** The Lord is kind and merciful, slow to anger, and rich in compassion.

Bless the LORD, O my soul;  
and all my being, bless his holy name.  
Bless the LORD, O my soul,  
and forget not all his benefits.

He pardons all your iniquities,  
heals all your ills,  
redeems your life from destruction,  
he crowns you with kindness and compassion.

He will not always chide,  
nor does he keep his wrath forever.  
Not according to our sins does he deal with us,  
nor does he requite us according to our crimes.

For as the heavens are high above the earth,

so surpassing is his kindness toward those who fear him.  
As far as the east is from the west,  
so far has he put our transgressions from us.

**Commentary: Psalm 103:1-2, 3-4, 9-10, 11-12 by Fr. Eugene Hensell, OSB:** This psalm is can be read as an extended commentary on Exodus 34:6-7. There we are told of God's mercy, graciousness, steadfast love and faithfulness. This God is always ready to forgive sinners. In the present psalm the psalmist praises God profusely for all of these attributes, especially those of steadfast love and compassion (Ps 103:1-4). This meditation is not based on theoretical or abstract propositions about the nature of God. It is based on the memory of lived experience. While we are used to hearing a great deal about God's justice, righteousness, and judgment. In this psalm we hear mostly about God's goodness and mercy which extends to all aspects of human life. In the bible the phrase "steadfast love" (hesed in Hebrew) implies a committed relationship based on grace. It is the peculiar and profound way that God loves us. This is what the present psalm celebrates.

Part of the experience of God's steadfast love is the way that God lovingly forgives our sins (Ps 103:9-12). While we might well deserve to be looked upon and related to as sinners, that is not what God does. In the face of sin God looks upon us with compassion. The power of compassion is manifested in a caring that supersedes anger. This is how God relates to those who "fear God". This has nothing to do with being afraid. It is a phrase that expresses a deep and loving reverence for God. It is concretized in acts of love and obedience. From beginning to end this psalm proclaims the "good news" of God.

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## **Second Reading Romans 14:7-9**

*Whether we live or die, we are the Lord's.*

## **A reading from the Letter of Saint Paul to the Romans**

Brothers and sisters:

None of us lives for oneself, and no one dies for oneself.

For if we live, we live for the Lord,  
and if we die, we die for the Lord;  
so then, whether we live or die, we are the Lord's.  
For this is why Christ died and came to life,  
that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living.

### **The word of the Lord**

**Commentary: Romans 14:7-9 by John Paul Heil:** Main Theme: Both in life and in death we belong to the Lord Jesus Christ.

In this section of Paul's letter to the Romans he addresses a specific problem within the Roman Christian community. He focuses his exhortation upon the Christian love and peace that should prevail between two distinct groups of Christians at Rome, those whom Paul designates the "strong" as opposed to the "weak" in faith. Although Paul does not fully disclose the precise details behind this rift, it quite possibly has its origin and background in certain problems caused by idolatrous pagan practices within the Roman cultural milieu.

The so-called "strong" in faith were those Christians who had no scruples about eating certain kinds of food, perhaps including meat which may have been offered to idols. They considered themselves superior to the "weak" whose troubled consciences prevented them from partaking of particular types of food, perhaps including idolatrous meat, which would associate them with idolatrous worship.

Paul insists that the "strong" and "weak" in faith should mutually respect one another since both groups serve the same Lord. A Christian does not live or die for himself or herself only, but lives and dies in complete and total dedication to the one and same Lord of us all. Both while we are alive and when we die, then, we belong entirely to the Lord. Christ died and came to life again through his resurrection precisely in order to initiate his mighty rule over all of us, not only after we have died, but now, while we are still living--whether we are "strong" or "weak" in faith.

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### **Gospel Acclamation John 13:34**

✠ Alleluia, alleluia.

I give you a new commandment, says the Lord;  
love one another as I have loved you.

## **Gospel Matthew 18:21-35**

*I say to you, forgive not seven times, but seventy-seven times.*

### **A reading from the holy Gospel according to Matthew**

Peter approached Jesus and asked him,

"Lord, if my brother sins against me,

how often must I forgive?

As many as seven times?"

Jesus answered, "I say to you, not seven times but seventy-seven times.

That is why the kingdom of heaven may be likened to a king who decided to settle accounts with his servants.

When he began the accounting,

a debtor was brought before him who owed him a huge amount.

Since he had no way of paying it back,

his master ordered him to be sold,

along with his wife, his children, and all his property,

in payment of the debt.

At that, the servant fell down, did him homage, and said,

'Be patient with me, and I will pay you back in full.'

Moved with compassion the master of that servant

let him go and forgave him the loan.

When that servant had left, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a much smaller amount.

He seized him and started to choke him, demanding,

'Pay back what you owe.'

Falling to his knees, his fellow servant begged him,

'Be patient with me, and I will pay you back.'

But he refused.

Instead, he had the fellow servant put in prison

until he paid back the debt.

Now when his fellow servants saw what had happened,

they were deeply disturbed, and went to their master

and reported the whole affair.

His master summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked servant!

I forgave you your entire debt because you begged me to.

Should you not have had pity on your fellow servant,

as I had pity on you?'

Then in anger his master handed him over to the torturers

until he should pay back the whole debt.  
So will my heavenly Father do to you,  
unless each of you forgives your brother from your heart."

## **The Gospel of the Lord**

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