

Grace, mercy and peace from God our Father
and the Lord Jesus Christ be with you all
and also with you.

Let us confess our sins to God our Father.

Heavenly Father, we have sinned against you
and against our neighbour
in thought and word and deed,
through negligence, through weakness,
through our own deliberate fault;
by what we have done and by what we have failed to do.
We are truly sorry and repent of all our sins.
For the sake of your Son Jesus Christ who died for us,
forgive us all that is past;
and grant that we may serve you
in newness of life to the glory of your name. Amen

Absolution Almighty God, who forgives all who truly repent, have mercy on you,
pardon and deliver you from all your sins, confirm and strengthen you in all
goodness, and keep you in eternal life; through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

Hosea 2:14-20

The Lord says this concerning Israel, his people: "I will now persuade her,
and bring her into the wilderness, and speak tenderly to her.
From there I will give her her vineyards,
and make the Valley of Achor a door of hope.
There she shall respond as in the days of her youth,
as at the time when she came out of the land of Egypt."
On that day, says the Lord, you will call me, 'My husband', and no longer will you
call me, 'My Baal'. For I will remove the names of the Baals from her mouth, and
they shall be mentioned by name no more. I will make for you a covenant on that
day with the wild animals, the birds of the air, and the creeping things of the
ground; and I will abolish the bow, the sword, and war from the land; and I will
make you lie down in safety. And I will take you for my wife for ever; I will take you
for my wife in righteousness and in justice, in steadfast love, and in mercy. I will
take you for my wife in faithfulness; and you shall know the Lord.
This is the word of the Lord;
Thanks be to God.

Mark 2:13-22 [Jesus Calls Levi]

Jesus went out again beside the lake; the whole crowd gathered around him, and he taught them. As he was walking along, he saw Levi son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax booth, and he said to him, 'Follow me.' And he got up and followed him.

And as he sat at dinner in Levi's house, many tax-collectors and sinners were also sitting with Jesus and his disciples—for there were many who followed him. When the scribes of the Pharisees saw that he was eating with sinners and tax-collectors, they said to his disciples, 'Why does he eat with tax-collectors and sinners?' When Jesus heard this, he said to them, 'Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I have come to call not the righteous but sinners.'

Now John's disciples and the Pharisees were fasting; and people came and said to him, 'Why do John's disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?' Jesus said to them, 'The wedding-guests cannot fast while the bridegroom is with them, can they? As long as they have the bridegroom with them, they cannot fast. The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast on that day.'

'No one sews a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old cloak; otherwise, the patch pulls away from it, the new from the old, and a worse tear is made. And no one puts new wine into old wineskins; otherwise, the wine will burst the skins, and the wine is lost, and so are the skins; but one puts new wine into fresh wineskins.'

This is the gospel of the Lord.

Praise to you, Lord Jesus Christ.

Sermon

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Once, years ago, I had to write an essay on one of the lesser-known, and less approachable prophets of the O.T. – Hosea. I found it much more arresting than I had anticipated, and I finished by quoting from chapter 11. Its one of the few passages from Hosea to make it into the Lectionary. It gives the lie to our image of a remote, angry God in his relationship to Israel: I was to Israel like those who lift infants to their cheeks. I bent down to them and fed them. I added: Sounds like a guy worth supporting, don't you think? Probably cries at weddings and football matches too. I wasn't to know that the examiner was a future bishop!

Our reading from Hosea used a word that resonates with every Jew – Covenant. Covenant is described as a bond – a bond voluntarily entered into by two parties. A sort of contract, but one of loyalty and steadfast love. Covenant describes the relationship that the Israelites had with YHWH their God. It set them apart from all other nations and peoples. In their minds at least, they were God's chosen people. But in the Northern Kingdom they had reverted to the fertility gods of the Canaanites – to the Baals; and had ignored the Covenant with YHWH. Hosea reminded them of the promises of YHWH to his people, describing the covenant relationship like that of a husband to his wife: "I will now allure her, and speak

tenderly to her. I will take her for my wife forever". Hosea became a prophet in this Northern Kingdom – Israel - in the 8th century. It was a time of upheaval – a rapid and vicious succession of five kings ended with invasion by Tiglath-Pileser III of Assyria. The inhabitants were carried off to slavery.

Yet today's Psalm reminds us just how valuable is this covenant with God, for all who believe in him. Again, God is portrayed as gentle, not vengeful: "The Lord is full of compassion and mercy, slow to anger and of great kindness ...As the heavens are high above the earth, so great is his mercy upon those who fear him." The psalmist finishes, "Bless the Lord, O my soul." Belief and trust in God is a blessing. The passage from Mark's Gospel is that Jesus, the Spirit of God, gives life – new life – to the ancient Covenant with God, his Father. Jesus makes it very plain that the Jewish laws of cleanliness, and of not eating with outsiders, are a barrier to his mission: "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I have come to call not the righteous, but sinners." It is very clear that he is kicking against the letter of the Law. He specifically challenges the scribes of the Pharisees about their interpretation of the Law. They ask his disciples why this observant Jew is eating with tax-collectors and sinners – with lots of them, in fact. He is radically, publicly, practising open table fellowship. We should, too.

Incidentally, the King James translation didn't have a down on people who sell alcohol when it used the description: "publicans and sinners", it signified those who ran the public tax system on behalf of the Romans. And as if to underline this, Jesus chose to ask a tax collector, Levi, to follow him. Capernaum, on the north-west corner of the Sea of Galilee, was on an important trade route between east and west, and Levi collected tolls on all travellers. Rather like land stewards in Ireland who collected rents from tenants of 19th century estates for absentee landowners, toll-booth operators were hated, as agents of the ruling Tetrarch, Antipas and the Roman overlords. They were despised.

All three writers of the synoptic gospels thought that this choice of Levi, this deliberate flouting of the received wisdom of the Law, was sufficiently astounding, sufficiently controversial, to include it in their account of this prophet, Jesus. To demonstrate that his incarnation signified God's determination to change the hearts and minds of his people – for that is literally what the word "repent" means – and that is why these short vignettes, these memories of the eye-witnesses of Jesus are so vivid, and so important.

Take the analogy of putting new wine in old wine-skins, or of patching an old coat with an un-shrunk patch. Jesus' incarnation – his temporary pitching-of-his-tent on earth, as John's Gospel so beautifully puts it – is to examine and to change things. To get back to loving our God, and loving our neighbour. To try to re-introduce God's Covenant.

Today's Psalm is a beautiful evocation of what that Covenant offers: it is as relevant today to us as it was to the Israelites of that time. God is the same, yesterday, today

and forever. "As a father who has compassion on his children, so is the Lord merciful towards those who fear him."

What was it that I had the cheek to say to that examiner? – "Sounds like a guy worth supporting, don't you think? Probably cries at weddings and football matches too." I'm quite sure he does. He loves us. All he asks is our fealty, our love, in return. His invitation is open. Open to everyone.

And now to the one God; Father, Son and Holy Spirit, be ascribed, as is most justly due, all might, majesty, dominion, power and glory. Amen.

The Apostles' Creed

I believe in God, the Father almighty,
creator of heaven and earth.

I believe in Jesus Christ, God's only Son, our Lord,
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,
born of the Virgin Mary,
suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, died and was buried;
he descended to the dead.

On the third day he rose again;
he ascended into heaven,

he is seated at the right hand of the Father,
and he will come again to judge the living and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Holy Catholic Church,
the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. **Amen.**

Intercessions, beginning with the Collect of the Second Sunday before Lent

Almighty God,

you have created the heavens and the earth
and made us in your own image:

Teach us to discern your hand in all your works
and your likeness in all your children;

through Jesus Christ our Lord, who with you and the Holy Spirit
reigns supreme over all things, now and for ever.

Amen.

We pray for the Church in the world. Make the Church a true witness to the light that has come into the world. Grant to all Christian people so to be faithful to Christ that as he shared our humanity we may be drawn into his divinity.

Lord, in your mercy ...

We pray, too, for our own country, and for Michael D. Higgins our President. We pray for our leaders; for members of the Oireachtas and of our public services, that they may live and work honourably, ethically and fairly, as they seek to steer our country to an equitable, safe future. *... hear our prayer*

May the Lord, by whom all things were made, look with compassion on the world; may we who know God bring his light to others. As the Word was made flesh for our salvation, may he dwell among us, be close to us in our families and friendships with our neighbours. Be mindful, O Lord, of your people present before you, and of those who are absent through age, sickness or infirmity. We pray for all who are carers, whether at home or in hospital *... hear our prayer*

Let us place into God's hands those for whom we want to pray. We pray for our own community; for the people for whom the COVID pandemic is a constant fear, for those who have been struck by the Virus. Lord, shine upon all who are in the darkness of suffering or grief, that in your light they may receive hope and courage, and in your presence may find their rest and peace. We know that God loves us all with a greater love than we could ever imagine. In the stillness of your house, Lord, we are, for a few moments, here with you, for them, as we ask for your intercession. *... hear our prayer*

We pray for the departed who have walked in the light through this world and have come to the perfect light of heaven. May we with them become the children of God for ever. O Lord, support us all the day long of this troublesome life, until the shadows lengthen and the evening comes; the busy world is hushed, the fever of life is over and our work is done. Then Lord, in your mercy, grant us safe lodging, a holy rest, and peace at the last. *... hear our prayer*

Merciful Father,

**Accept these our prayers for the sake of your Son,
Our Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.**

The Lord's Prayer

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name;
thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread.

And forgive us our trespasses
as we forgive those who trespass against us.

And lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory,
for ever and ever, Amen.

Dismissal:

The Lord be with you. **And also with you.**

May God himself, the God of peace, make you perfect and holy,
and keep you safe and blameless, in spirit, soul and body,
and give you grace to carry the good news of Christ;
and the blessing ...

Amen