

Readings for October 31, 2021 – 31st Sunday in Ordinary Time

## *My Strength, My Rock*

*In a world that seems filled with division and hatred, these readings are comforting. They are simply about a better way – love. Our Psalm and our second reading today remind us that we have a God who is our rock, our refuge and fortress. The Lord has conquered even death, and now lives forever. And all this is because of God's great love for us, which we are asked to give in return.*

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**Opening prayer:** Thank you, God, for always revealing your strength and power to us. Help us to pay attention to your presence in our lives, help us to realize our great need for you, and to respond in love for all that you do for us. Amen.

**Meditation suggestion:** Look over the Psalm and call to mind a few of the ways in which God has been your strength and your fortress.

What were these situations like? How did you know that God was there for you? How did you respond to God?

Think of what those strong words in the Psalm imply. Does this image fit with your own image of God?

Share a few of your thoughts, if you are willing.

### **Reading I Dt 6:2-6**

Moses spoke to the people, saying:

"Fear the LORD, your God, and keep, throughout the days of your lives,

all his statutes and commandments which I enjoin on you, and thus have long life.

Hear then, Israel, and be careful to observe them, that you may grow and prosper the more,

in keeping with the promise of the LORD, the God of your fathers,

to give you a land flowing with milk and honey.

"Hear, O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD alone! Therefore, you shall love the LORD, your God,

with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength.

Take to heart these words which I enjoin on you today."

Responsorial Psalm **Ps 18:2-3, 3-4, 47, 51**

**R. (2) I love you, Lord, my strength.**

I love you, O LORD, my strength, O LORD, my rock, my fortress, my deliverer.

**R. I love you, Lord, my strength.**

My God, my rock of refuge, my shield, the horn of my salvation, my stronghold!  
Praised be the LORD, I exclaim, and I am safe from my enemies.

**R. I love you, Lord, my strength.**

The LORD lives! And blessed be my rock! Extolled be God my savior.  
You who gave great victories to your king and showed kindness to your anointed.

**R. I love you, Lord, my strength.**

Reading II **Heb 7:23-28**

Brothers and sisters: The levitical priests were many because they were prevented by death from remaining in office, but Jesus, because he remains forever, has a priesthood that does not pass away. Therefore, he is always able to save those who approach God through him, since he lives forever to make intercession for them. It was fitting that we should have such a high priest: holy, innocent, undefiled, separated from sinners, higher than the heavens. He has no need, as did the high priests, to offer sacrifice day after day, first for his own sins and then for those of the people; he did that once for all when he offered himself. For the law appoints men subject to weakness to be high priests, but the word of the oath, which was taken after the law, appoints a son, who has been made perfect forever.

Gospel **Mk 12:28b-34**

One of the scribes came to Jesus and asked him, "Which is the first of all the commandments?" Jesus replied, "The first is this: *Hear, O Israel! The Lord our God is Lord alone! You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength.* The second is this: *You shall love your neighbor as yourself.* There is no other commandment greater than these." The scribe said to him, "Well said, teacher. You are right in saying, 'He is One and there is no other than he.' And 'to love him with all your heart, with all your understanding, with all your strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself' is worth more than all burnt offerings and sacrifices." And when Jesus saw that he answered with understanding, he said to him, "You are not far from the kingdom of God." And no one dared to ask him any more questions.

# Related Reflections

## Jesus fulfills the law – in love

*Love—devoted love for God and others—is what the Law and the Prophets are all about. Everything—all God’s ways in the world, all God’s will for us—hangs on these two commandments: love God and love others. Or, in other words, love is the fulfillment of the Law.*

Other early Christians got the message. The Apostle Paul sums this up as neatly as any of them, in Romans 13:8-10:

*Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the Law. The commandments, “You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet”; and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, “Love your neighbor as yourself.” Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the Law.*

Jesus oriented his life around love—not holiness, not purity, not strength or power, not truth or even wisdom, not even justice or peace. He oriented his life around *love*: devoted love for God and devoted love for others. And in doing so, Jesus demonstrated true holiness and purity, he showed true strength and power, he revealed true wisdom, he carved out the path toward true justice and peace.

In other words, *all the things the Law pointed to—holiness, purity, wisdom, truth, mercy, justice, peace—Jesus fulfilled them all in love.*

And likewise, when we orient our life around love, we too fulfill the Law. If we orient our life around striving for holiness or spotless purity, we will miss the fullness of God’s will for us. If we orient our life around some pure search for truth, we will miss the fullness of God’s will for us. If we orient our life around a relentless quest for justice, or even peace, we will miss the fullness of God’s will for us.

But when we orient our life around love in the way of Jesus—devoted love for God expressed in devoted love for others—then we discover true holiness and purity, true strength and wisdom, true justice and peace along the way.

The question is, *do we really believe it?* Are we willing to put it into practice? Relentlessly, persistently, above all else, seeking to love God and others?

Michael Pahl, from his blog: <https://michaelpahl.com/2018/06/05/jesus-fulfills-the-law-in-love/>

## ‘Whoever dwells in love, dwells in God’

This Sunday we hear a scribe ask Jesus what commandment is the greatest. And Jesus’ response is: to love God and neighbour.

St Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153) in *On Loving God* considered four questions: why should we love God? How can we experience God’s love? How can we love our neighbour? And how can we love ourselves?

St Bernard understands that loving God is a spiritual journey, and is therefore not something that is ever done perfectly. Rather we perfect how we love as we live. We love God because God is love and therefore lovely and loveable in Godself.

But we know that we love other things in addition to God, and so the journey towards loving God more perfectly involves the work of ordering our loves such that we grow to love God first. All the other things we love can be good, but all our goods come from God. It might be a selfish form of love at first, to love God for the blessings he gives us. As we grow in love we will love God not just for his blessings to us, but first and foremost, we will love God out of gratitude for creating us and gifting us with our existence.

But what if we cannot see God or feel that we're not in the right state to be in love with God? St Augustine said: "do not think yourself wholly unsuited to seeing God. Whoever dwells in love, dwells in God."

So if you think you cannot see anything of God, love whoever is nearest to you. And look inside that to see where the love is coming from. And thus, in a way, you will see God. By loving your neighbour you have begun a spiritual journey that will find its rest and its end in God.

*From the CPLO and the Jesuit Institute, Oct. 26, 2020*

## *Discussion Questions*

In the Gospel passage, why do you think Jesus is pleased with the scribe's statement?

What do you think Jesus means when he talks about "the kingdom of God?"

Talk further about the four questions that St. Bernard raises (see the reflection above).

Which one seems hardest to answer, or to live out?

Where are you most experiencing (or seeing) God's love in your life right now?

### **Closing prayer:**

Lord Jesus, Stir your Holy Spirit within me.

Let me see as you, and love as you love, without counting the cost. Amen. *(Allan F. Wright)*

### **Also:**

O Lord my God, teach my heart this day where and how to see you; where and how to find you... Let me find you by loving you, let me love you when I find you. — *St. Anselm*

# *Focus on Justice*

## **Celebrating our saints**

October is a great month for saints. It begins with the commemoration of St. Thérèse of Lisieux and ends with All Hallows Eve, the night of spirits who do not so much haunt streets as inspire hearts.

October is a month of giants: Francis of Assisi, who rebuilt the church and inspired centuries of holy souls; Teresa of Avila, mighty doctor of the church and reformer of the Carmelites; Anthony Claret, missionary, founder, archbishop of Cuba, and chaplain to the Queen of Spain; Simon, Jude, and Luke, apostles and evangelist; Ignatius of Antioch, one of our earliest bishops, a martyr in Rome; Margaret Mary Alacoque, Visitation contemplative, who with her Jesuit friend Claude La Colombière bequeathed the Sacred Heart devotion to the church.

Wholeheartedness means that we present everything of ourselves before our God, even our dust and dross. Talk about diversity. Yet they all had in common the kind of wholeheartedness that the Book of Deuteronomy and the Gospel of Mark require: to love the Lord our God with all one's heart, soul, mind, and strength.

At first hearing, the “Great Commandment” might suggest to us, as it did to a young woman at the turn of the twentieth century, a range of high and mighty acts:

*“All the deeds I long to accomplish for you. I would be a martyr, a doctor of the church. I should like to accomplish the most heroic deeds—the spirit of the crusader burns in me. I long to die on the battlefield in defense of the holy church. I would be a missionary. I would choose to be flayed like St. Bartholomew, plunged into boiling oil like St. John, or like St. Ignatius of Antioch I would be ground by the teeth of wild beasts into bread worthy of God. With St. Agnes and St. Cecilia I would offer my neck to the sword of the executioner, and like St. Joan of Arc, I would murmur the name of Jesus at the stake.”*

And yet **Thérèse Martin**, psychologically and physically frail, hidden and protected from the onslaughts of the world, soon realized that her gift was not that of the noble warrior or the martyr of faith, nor that of an apostle, or missionary. Her grace was to love with whatever heart and mind were given her.

The wisdom shared by all the saints, after all, was not about the particular talents or deficits one brought to the world. It was about the wholeheartedness of love, a willingness to give it all away. They also seemed to know that wholeheartedness was not a matter of “once and for all,” or something that would happen overnight. It was, rather, a matter of opening up their entire lives to the transforming grace of God.

The little Thérèse would learn to love despite countless slights imagined or real, suffocating caregivers, and the frailty of her body and psyche. The great Teresa would face victories and terrible defeats, rewards and rejections—but with a permeating faith. Francis of Assisi suffered nerve-wracking discouragement and disappointments with himself and his communities. The wonder of their lives was that even in their defeats they abandoned everything into the care of God.

We imagine that wholeheartedness is some achievement or jewel of ours that we bestow upon the grateful Almighty. Or we fear that if we offer our all, something cherished will be snatched away from us. Too much might be asked. Something terrible demanded.

We miss the point. Wholeheartedness means that we present everything of ourselves before our God, even our dust and dross. The gift is not taken away, it is transformed. We are not robbed, we are revitalized.

Saints have entered into the mystery of Christ, described by Karl Rahner as “the unique case of the perfect fulfillment of human reality (a nature which, by giving itself fully to the mystery of fullness, so empties itself that it becomes God) which means that humans only are when they give themselves away.”

*John Kavanaugh, SJ*

*The late Fr. Kavanaugh was a professor of philosophy at St. Louis University. His writings are published on [www.liturgy.slu.edu](http://www.liturgy.slu.edu)*

### **Questions:**

Can you think of some other saints who showed us how to live “wholeheartedly” so that we might bring about a more just and loving world?

One of the themes of Catholic Social Teaching focuses on **Rights and Responsibilities:**

“Human dignity can be protected and a healthy community can be achieved only if human rights are protected and responsibilities are met. Therefore, every person has a fundamental right to life and a right to those things required for human decency. Corresponding to these rights are duties and responsibilities--to one another, to our families, and to the larger society.”

<https://www.usccb.org/beliefs-and-teachings/what-we-believe/catholic-social-teaching/seven-themes-of-catholic-social-teaching>

Do you think Jesus had this in mind when he reminded us to love our neighbor?

Do you think as a society in general, we tend to focus more on our personal rights than on our duties and responsibilities? Notice that Church teaching links these concepts.