

SUNDAY READINGS

READ AT HOME

Lord Jesus Christ, King of the Universe

Year B

21 November 2021



Collect

Almighty ever-living God,
whose will is to restore all things
in your beloved Son, the King of the universe,
grant, we pray,
that the whole creation, set free from slavery,
may render your majesty service
and ceaselessly proclaim your praise.
Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son,
who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, for ever and ever.

Amen.

Readings and Commentaries

Who are the “masters of the universe”? Is it those who pull the levers of the global financial markets? Is it the heads of state who command vast military forces? Is it the media moguls who control the flow of information?

In 1925 Pope Pius XI decided it was time to throw down the gauntlet to the hostile powers of the world. He established the feast of Christ the King to let the world know where ultimate authority lay. Nearly a century later the religious and secular politics of the world have changed radically, yet we still dare to claim that love conquers all, and none have loved and ever will love like Jesus Christ.

This is the power that reaches deep into our hearts and extends to the farthest reaches of the universe. This is the kingdom of Christ, as the Preface declares:

an eternal and universal kingdom,
a kingdom of truth and life,
a kingdom of holiness and grace,
a kingdom of justice, love and peace.

A reading from the prophet Daniel 7:13–14

I gazed into the visions of the night.
And I saw, coming on the clouds of heaven,
one like a son of man.
He came to the one of great age
and was led into his presence.
On him was conferred sovereignty,
glory and kingship,
and men of all peoples, nations and languages
became his servants.
His sovereignty is an eternal sovereignty
which shall never pass away,
nor will his empire be destroyed.

First Reading

The first reading comes, as it did last Sunday, from the prophet Daniel. Please see the commentary there for a general introduction to the book.

Today's passage records the final section of a vision that appears in other Near Eastern traditions – that of a succession of four kingdoms leading to a fifth that is ideal. It would be good for readers to look at the whole account (7:1-14) in which the first four kingdoms are symbolised by monstrous beasts, the fifth by “one like a son of man”, The vision has links with other prophets and the psalms, and even with non-Jewish myths.

Opinions are divided as to how to interpret the figure described as “one like a son of man”. It could be an angel of God or a heavenly representation of the whole people of Israel. New Testament writers clearly identify this figure with Jesus. This short text is quoted in the apocalyptic discourses attributed to Jesus in the synoptic gospels and in the passion narratives. It is also cited in several other places in the New Testament – in the writings of Paul, in the letter to the Hebrews, and in the book of Revelation.

The language of the reading poses no great difficulty. The reader's task is to proclaim the text with a sense of awe and majesty as befits a heavenly vision.

Responsorial Psalm Ps 92:1–2, 5

R. The Lord is king;
he is robed in majesty.
The Lord is king, with majesty enrobed;
the Lord has robed himself with might,
he has girded himself with power. R.
The world you made firm, not to be moved;
your throne has stood firm from of old.
From all eternity, O Lord, you are. R.
Truly your decrees are to be trusted.
Holiness is fitting to your house,
O Lord, until the end of time. R.

Responsorial Psalm

Psalms 92/93 is a hymn of praise that acclaims God as king and ruler over the whole world. It is one of a collection of psalms commonly called “enthronement psalms” because they seem to be associated with liturgical celebrations of divine kingship.

The response is drawn from the first line of the psalm. It is not just a matter-of-fact statement about God's kingship, but rather an emphatic declaration. The tone of the psalm throughout is one of joyful praise. By their proclamation readers are inviting the congregation to enter into the psalm's glad spirit of acclamation. Since all three verses are of three rather than four lines, the reader will need to give clear vocal and visual cues for the congregation's response.

A reading from the book of the Apocalypse 1:5–8

Jesus Christ is the faithful witness, the First-born from the dead, the Ruler of the kings of the earth. He loves us and has washed away our sins with his blood, and made us a line of kings, priests to serve his God and Father; to him, then, be glory and power for ever and ever. Amen. It is he who is coming on the clouds; everyone will see him, even those who pierced him, and all the races of the earth will mourn over him. This is the truth. Amen. 'I am the Alpha and the Omega' says the Lord God, who is, who was, and who is to come, the Almighty.

A reading from the holy Gospel according to John

18:33–37

'Are you the king of the Jews?' Pilate asked. Jesus replied, 'Do you ask this of your own accord, or have others spoken to you about me?' Pilate answered, 'Am I a Jew? It is your own people and the chief priests who have handed you over to me: what have you done?' Jesus replied, 'Mine is not a kingdom of this world; if my kingdom were of this world, my men would have fought to prevent my being surrendered to the Jews. But my kingdom is not of this kind.' 'So you are a king then?' said Pilate. 'It is you who say it' answered Jesus. 'Yes, I am a king. I was born for this, I came into the world for this: to bear witness to the truth; and all who are on the side of truth listen to my voice.'

Second Reading

The book of the Apocalypse aims to give encouragement to a persecuted Christian minority, threatened by the might of hostile powers. Like other works of this kind it uses visions and symbols to insist that the forces of good will prevail. Of their nature apocalyptic writings are works of imagination and thus open to all kinds of interpretation but their ultimate purpose is clear: to persuade struggling communities to believe in final victory.

This passage comes from the opening chapter of the work which identifies the recipients as the seven Churches of Asia. It is a short burst of praise (a doxology) in honour of Christ. The three titles given him correspond to past, present and future: Jesus has given faithful testimony, now he is risen, and finally he will reign over all. The second sentence takes on board expressions from other New Testament writings, such as the reference to kings and priests in 1 Peter 2:5.

The third sentence has echoes of the reading from Daniel, along with an allusion to John's account of Jesus' side being pierced on the cross. The reading finishes with God's claim to be the beginning and end of everything – "the Alpha and the Omega" – and as eternally past, present and future.

The reading is a series of acclamations and declarations. It calls for a strong and deliberate delivery, with careful pausing to give emphasis to the two "Amens".

Gospel

This final scripture reading of the liturgical year harks back to Good Friday. It is an excerpt from John's account of the passion. This seems to fall naturally into five acts:

1. Jesus' arrest (18:1-11)
2. Jesus before the Jewish authorities (18:12-27)
3. Jesus' trial before Pilate (18:28 – 19:16a)
4. The crucifixion and death of Jesus (19:16b-30)
5. From cross to tomb (19:31-42).

We hear from Act Three, the core of the drama. This act is subdivided into seven scenes which move us in and out of Pilate's stronghold as Jesus is tried. Today's reading is the second of these scenes. It presents the first exchange between Pilate and Jesus inside the fortress. The key issue emerges: the true identity of Jesus and the nature of his kingship.

Prior to the passion narrative, the term "king" only appears four times in this gospel. On each occasion it's clear that the term expresses false expectations of Jesus' messiahship. By contrast the word is used ten times in the passion story, three of which are in this passage, along with three references to "kingdom". John has already demonstrated the nature of Jesus' kingship in the story of the washing of the feet. It's a kingship of love, a love so powerful that it will overcome death. Now Jesus declares his kingdom to be a realm of truth, the kind of truth that "will make you free" (8:32).

As is generally the case in the dialogues of John's gospel, Jesus' conversation partner fails to grasp the true meaning of what is being said. Pilate's uncomprehending replies give Jesus the opportunity to teach ever more profoundly. Today's gospel reading features a short but crucial segment of the passion narrative that may be lost in the full narrative on Good Friday. It deserves to be read with deliberation to as to convey the full weight of the truth being taught.

Concluding Prayer

Solemn Blessing (Ordinary Time I)

Bow down for the blessing.
May the Lord bless us and keep us.
Amen.

May he let his face shine upon us
and show us his mercy.
Amen.

May he turn his countenance towards us
and give us his peace.
Amen.

May the blessing of almighty God,
the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit,
come down on us and remain with us for ever.
Amen.

(Adapted from the Solemn Blessing for Ordinary Time I, Roman Missal p. 714)