

SUNDAY READINGS

READ AT HOME

Thirty-Third Sunday in Ordinary Time

Year B

14 November 2021



Collect

Grant us, we pray, O Lord our God,
the constant gladness of being devoted to you,
for it is full and lasting happiness
to serve with constancy
the author of all that is good.
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

No previous generation has lived with the consciousness that human beings are capable of destroying the planet. Fear of nuclear conflagration may have receded somewhat from our minds, only to be replaced by anxiety about the potentially catastrophic implications of climate change. The truth is that, even if the global community were able to disarm these threats, we believers would still live our lives in constant expectation of an end. What makes us different is our belief that the ultimate end will be a godsend, a blessing, a completion.

When and how the end will come, either for us personally or for the whole of creation, lies beyond our sight. The Bible doesn't give us scientific information like this. Instead it uses vivid imagery and colourful language to warn of chaos on a cosmic scale. This is not meant to frighten us. On the contrary it's to convince us that whatever upheaval lies ahead our individual and global destinies are in God's hands. The horizon against which we live is one of hope. Our task is to let this hope liberate us to put all our energies to work for the well-being of the world.

A reading from the prophet Daniel**12:1–3**

'At that time Michael will stand up, the great prince who mounts guard over your people. There is going to be a time of great distress, unparalleled since nations first came into existence. When that time comes, your own people will be spared, all those whose names are found written in the Book. Of those who lie sleeping in the dust of the earth many will awake, some to everlasting life, some to shame and everlasting disgrace. The learned will shine as brightly as the vault of heaven, and those who have instructed many in virtue, as bright as stars for all eternity.'

First Reading

The book of Daniel is allocated to the prophetic writings but is unique in the Old Testament. The whole of the work is in the form of an apocalypse. Writings in this genre aim to give encouragement to a persecuted minority, threatened by the might of hostile powers. They claim to reveal secret truths to those who know how to interpret their visions and symbols. Heavenly beings, cosmic upheavals and fierce battles are commonly featured. Ultimately the forces of good prevail.

Of their nature apocalyptic writings call for imaginative engagement, and are thus open to all kinds of interpretation. Generally it seems best to focus on their ultimate purpose rather than on the precise meaning of particular elements.

In the case of Daniel, the Jewish community is suffering persecution at the hands of the foreign tyrant Antiochus Epiphanes about a century and a half before the birth of Christ. The passage for today comes towards the end of a vision described at length in Chapters 10–12.

God's princely agent in the struggle is named as Michael; he appears again in the apocalypse of the New Testament, the book of Revelation (12:7). The saving of those whose names are written in the Book is also echoed there (Rev 13:8). The text goes on to testify to an emerging belief in resurrection from the dead, whether for "everlasting life" or for "shame and everlasting disgrace".

The reading is short but vivid and dramatic. It should be delivered with lively energy.

Responsorial Psalm**Ps 15:5, 8–11**

R. Keep me safe, O God;
you are my hope.

○ Lord, it is you who are my portion and cup;
it is you yourself who are my prize.
I keep the Lord ever in my sight:
since he is at my right hand, I shall stand firm. R.

And so my heart rejoices, my soul is glad;
even my body shall rest in safety.
For you will not leave my soul among the dead,
nor let your beloved know decay. R.

You will show me the path of life,
the fullness of joy in your presence,
at your right hand happiness for ever. R.

Responsorial Psalm

Psalm 15/16 is a prayer of trust and confidence in God. God is the giver of all good things and has the power to save from death.

The words – "For you will not leave my soul among the dead, nor let your beloved know decay" – have a clear connection with the first reading. We cannot be sure whether the psalmist was voicing an early intuition about life beyond death or was simply speaking of being saved from the threat of death. The psalm has been given an explicit Christian interpretation by Luke. He inserts these verses into the apostle Peter's speech on Pentecost Day (Acts 2:25–28) where he argues that Jesus' resurrection was foretold by David.

The response comes from the opening line of the psalm. The verses constitute a confident prayer that will readily be proclaimed in a spirit of joy and gratitude. Readers will note that the third verse is a line shorter than the other two so they will need to cue the congregation in with the right tone of voice and a glance.

A reading from the letter to the Hebrews

10:11–14, 18

All the priests stand at their duties every day, offering over and over again the same sacrifices which are quite incapable of taking sins away. Christ, on the other hand, has offered one single sacrifice for sins, and then taken his place for ever, at the right hand of God, where he is now waiting until his enemies are made into a footstool for him. By virtue of that one single offering, he has achieved the eternal perfection of all whom he is sanctifying. When all sins have been forgiven, there can be no more sin offerings.

A reading from the holy Gospel according to Mark

13:24–32

Jesus said to his disciples: 'In those days, after the time of distress, the sun will be darkened, the moon will lose its brightness, the stars will come falling from heaven and the powers in the heavens will be shaken. And then they will see the Son of Man coming in the clouds with great power and glory; then too he will send the angels to gather his chosen from the four winds, from the ends of the world to the ends of heaven.

'Take the fig tree as a parable: as soon as its twigs grow supple and its leaves come out, you know that summer is near. So with you, when you see these things happening: know that he is near, at the very gates. I tell you solemnly, before this generation has passed away all these things will have taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

'But as for that day or hour, nobody knows it, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son; no one but the Father.'

Second Reading

The final reading from Hebrews repeats and summarises one of the key themes of the letter. In contrast with the old system of offering sacrifices, Christ has offered himself once and for ever in a sacrifice that has accomplished the forgiveness of sin for all. Yet the victory is still being played out, for Christ "is now waiting until his enemies are made into a footstool for him" (a quote from Psalm 109/110).

Readers may be interested to know that what it means to say that Christ "has offered one single sacrifice for sins" continues to be the subject of lively theological debate. A related issue is the link between our repeated celebration of the eucharist and the once-and-for-all sacrifice of Christ.

Although the text raises serious theological questions, it should not present any major difficulty for the reader. The second sentence is rather long and complex and needs to be delivered with clarity. The passage as a whole is strongly affirmative.

Gospel

This final extract from Mark's gospel is a key section of the apocalyptic discourse in Chapter 13. God's ultimate triumph is the focus of today's reading.

The fearsome shaking of the heavens is described in language drawn from prophets. This cataclysmic event heralds the ultimate end of the world and the coming of the Son of Man (see Daniel 7:13-14), so it represents good news. The cosmic imagery is complemented by the homely parable of the fig tree coming into full bloom.

There is certainty in the assurance that in the end divine power will prevail, but what remains uncertain is when all this will come to pass. The effect of the reading is to both warn and encourage the Christian community to live with resilient faith.

Concluding Prayer

Solemn Blessing (Ordinary Time VI)

Bow down for the blessing.

May God bless us with every heavenly blessing,
make us always holy and pure in his sight,
pour out in abundance upon us the riches of his glory,
and teach us with the words of truth;
may he instruct us in the Gospel of salvation,
and ever endow us with fraternal charity.
Through Christ our Lord.

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 VI, Roman Missal p. 716)