

# SUNDAY READINGS

## READ AT HOME

Lord Jesus Christ, King of the Universe

Year A

26 November 2023



### 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

As a servant of the poor and of peace, Dorothy Day belongs among the sheep of today's gospel, but with a voice of her own. Here's what she wrote in June 1946:

“What we would like to do is change the world--make it a little simpler for people to feed, clothe, and shelter themselves as God intended them to do. And, by fighting for better conditions, by crying out unceasingly for the rights of the workers, the poor, of the destitute--the rights of the worthy and the unworthy poor, in other words--we can, to a certain extent, change the world; we can work for the oasis, the little cell of joy and peace in a harried world. We can throw our pebble in the pond and be confident that its ever-widening circle will reach around the world. We repeat, there is nothing we can do but love, and, dear God, please enlarge our hearts to love each other, to love our neighbour, to love our enemy as our friend” (Cited in Robert Ellsberg ed. *Dorothy Day: Selected Writings*, Maryknoll: Orbis, 2005, 98).

## A reading from the prophet Ezekiel

34:11–12, 15–17

The Lord says this: I am going to look after my flock myself and keep all of it in view. As a shepherd keeps all his flock in view when he stands up in the middle of his scattered sheep, so shall I keep my sheep in view. I shall rescue them from wherever they have been scattered during the mist and darkness. I myself will pasture my sheep, I myself will show them where to rest – it is the Lord who speaks. I shall look for the lost one, bring back the stray, bandage the wounded and make the weak strong. I shall watch over the fat and healthy. I shall be a true shepherd to them.

As for you, my sheep, the Lord says this: I will judge between sheep and sheep, between rams and he-goats.

## Responsorial Psalm

Ps 22:1–3, 5–6

**R.** The Lord is my shepherd;  
there is nothing I shall want.

The Lord is my shepherd;  
there is nothing I shall want.  
Fresh and green are the pastures  
where he gives me repose. **R.**

Near restful waters he leads me,  
to revive my drooping spirit.  
He guides me along the right path;  
he is true to his name. **R.**

You have prepared a banquet for me  
in the sight of my foes.  
My head you have anointed with oil;  
my cup is overflowing. **R.**

Surely goodness and kindness shall follow me  
all the days of my life.  
In the Lord's own house shall I dwell  
for ever and ever. **R.**

## First Reading

It was common enough in the world of the Old Testament for rulers to be thought of as shepherds. In spite of the actual disparity between the life of the shepherd – physically demanding, lowly, exposed and unglamorous – and the opulent life of the overlord, both had the responsibility of protecting and caring for their respective flocks. Israel freely applied the metaphor of shepherd to their true ruler, the God of the exodus. Kings, therefore, were answerable to God in their role as shepherds of the people. The failure of kings to fulfil this responsibility led to the disaster of the exile and the end of kingly rule in Israel. Ezekiel therefore assures the returned exiles that God will once again be their true shepherd. Much of the reading exploits and expands on the metaphor. Incidentally, some translations, such as the NRSV, have God destroying, rather than watching over, the sheep that are “fat and healthy”. Whether justified or not, this rendition accords with the biblical theme of reversal so plainly expressed in Mary's Magnificat.

One of the shepherd's tasks, as the last verse explains, is to “judge between sheep and sheep, between rams and he-goats”. This mention of judgement, sheep and goats provides a verbal link with the gospel parable, but not much more. The substance of the reading, unlike the parable, is not about the moral judgement of the sheep but about the qualities of the true shepherd. As such it paints an appealing and encouraging portrait which readers have the privilege of presenting to the assembly.

## Responsorial Psalm

This is the fourth time this year that Psalm 22/23 serves as the responsorial psalm, the most recent being on the 28<sup>th</sup> Sunday of the Year. This time it is formatted slightly differently, with the omission of four lines resulting in the more common arrangement of four four-line verses. The psalm has clearly been chosen in view of Ezekiel's oracle and the gospel parable. Much of the earlier commentary on the psalm is repeated here. The over-arching image in play is God as Israel's shepherd. The people's familiarity with the responsibilities of earthly shepherds made it easy to think of God in these terms. Just as shepherds ensured their sheep were kept safe and fed, so Israel's God protected and nourished the nation. Complementing the prime image of shepherding is that of hospitality. Generous provision for guests was (and remains) embedded in middle eastern culture. God may thus be readily thought of as a host who welcomes guests with scented oil and plies them with an abundance of food and drink. The buoyant spirit of the psalm is tinged with a realistic recognition of life's difficulties. Shepherds must lead their flock through “the valley of darkness,” while hosts provide for their guests “in the sight of (their) foes”. The principal challenge for readers is to pray this very familiar and much-loved psalm with fresh devotion. They will have served the assembly well if they give the impression the psalm has only just been discovered. They also need to take care with the two-part response and the two six-line stanzas. Thoughtful intonation and pausing will give the assembly the cues it needs to respond with confidence.

**A reading from the first letter  
of St Paul to the Corinthians 15:20–26, 28**

Christ has been raised from the dead, the first-fruits of all who have fallen asleep. Death came through one man and in the same way the resurrection of the dead has come through one man. Just as all men die in Adam, so all men will be brought to life in Christ; but all of them in the proper order: Christ as the first-fruits and then, after the coming of Christ, those who belong to him. After that will come the end, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father, having done away with every sovereignty, authority and power. For he must be king until he has put all his enemies under his feet and the last of the enemies to be destroyed is death. And when everything is subjected to him, then the Son himself will be subject in his turn to the One who subjected all things to him, so that God may be all in all.

**A reading from the holy Gospel  
according to Matthew 25:31–46**

Jesus said to his disciples: 'When the Son of Man comes in his glory, escorted by all the angels, then he will take his seat on his throne of glory. All the nations will be assembled before him and he will separate men one from another as the shepherd separates sheep from goats. He will place the sheep on his right hand and the goats on his left. Then the King will say to those on his right hand, "Come, you whom my Father has blessed, take for your heritage the kingdom prepared for you since the foundation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me food; I was thirsty and you gave me drink; I was a stranger and you made me welcome; naked and you clothed me, sick and you visited me, in prison and you came to see me." Then the virtuous will say to him in reply, "Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you; or thirsty and give you drink? When did we see you a stranger and make you welcome; naked and clothe you; sick or in prison and go to see you?" And the King will answer, "I tell you solemnly, in so far as you did this to one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did it to me." Next he will say to those on his left hand, "Go away from me, with your curse upon you, to the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry and you never gave me food; I was thirsty and you never gave me anything to drink; I was a stranger and you never made me welcome, naked and you never clothed me, sick and in prison and you never visited me." Then it will be their turn to ask, "Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty, a stranger or naked, sick or in prison, and did not come to your help?" Then he will answer, "I tell you solemnly, in so far as you neglected to do this to one of the least of these, you neglected to do it to me." And they will go away to eternal punishment, and the virtuous to eternal life.'

**Second Reading**

The second reading is an excerpt from Paul's teaching on the resurrection of the dead, expounded at length in chapter fifteen of 1 Corinthians. It has some apocalyptic features and presumes some knowledge of Old Testament traditions.

The first of these traditions is the requirement that the first part of the harvest be dedicated to God in symbolic recognition of God's sovereignty (Ex 23:16). The second is the story of the first human being – Adam being both a personal name and a word meaning humankind – and the universal reality of death that followed on from the Fall. The third is God's promise of a royal ruler to whom all enemies would be made subject (Ps 109/110).

The risen Christ is thus the first-fruits of all who have died and as such the sure sign of their ultimate resurrection. Just as Adam brought death, so Christ brings life for "all who belong to him". And finally, having overcome all opposing powers, most especially death itself, Christ will entrust universal sovereignty to God the Father. It's striking that on this feast acclaiming Christ as Universal King we read that "the Son himself will be subject" to God the Father.

Given that many in the assembly are unlikely to be familiar with both the background to and the rhetorical style of Paul's thought, readers have a responsibility to prepare their proclamation well. The better they have grasped the threads of Paul's argument, the more likely they are to illuminate them for their listeners. As usual, the NRSV offers the text in inclusive language.

**Gospel**

Matthew alone records this vivid depiction of the last judgement. He adds immeasurably to its impact by making it Jesus' last word before the saga of his passion begins. While commonly called the parable of the sheep and the goats, it isn't strictly a parable but a prophetic vision that takes advantage of the familiar biblical metaphor of shepherding and builds on the visions of Daniel (7:13-14) and Joel (3:1-3).

As it's "all the nations" who are being judged, the story anticipates the parting commission Jesus will give to the apostles to "make disciples of all the nations" (28:20). It may be that the phrase "the least of these who are members of my family" (NRSV) originally referred to those Christian believers who ventured into pagan territory as missionaries. In this perspective, the nations are being judged on their welcome or rejection of the gospel. Nowadays the criteria for judgement are understood to apply broadly to all human beings, but most especially to those who profess to follow Jesus.

Earlier in the gospel (9:13; 12:7), Jesus had twice cited God's word spoken by the prophet Hosea: "What I want is mercy, not sacrifice" (6:6). The works of mercy in the judgement story elaborate on this saying. No doubt this gospel text will prompt many hearers to an examination of conscience about their care of the needy. A happier outcome would be their discovery that Christ is best found in the poor and the powerless.

## Concluding Blessing

May almighty God always keep every adversity far from us  
and in his kindness pour out upon us the gifts of his blessing.

**Amen.**

May God keep our hearts attentive to his words,  
that they may be filled with everlasting gladness.

**Amen.**

And so, may we always understand what is good and right,  
and be found ever hastening along  
in the path of God's commands,  
made coheirs with the citizens of heaven.

**Amen.**

And 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 V, Roman Missal p 716)

