

SUNDAY READINGS

READ AT HOME

Thirty-Third Sunday in Ordinary Time

Year B

17 November 2024



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

Pre-Vatican II Catholics who ventured to read the scriptures (in an approved Catholic version) would have come across the word “Apocalypse” as the name of the last book of the Bible. In other editions such as the King James Version, it was called Revelation, and that’s its universal title today. The Jerusalem Bible lectionary, however, still uses the title “The book of the Apocalypse.”

It’s fair to say that the word “apocalypse” was not in most people’s everyday vocabulary in the way that it is today. The word’s primary meaning is, in fact, “revelation,” but its secondary meaning, “disaster” or “destruction” has come to the fore, largely because of the twin catastrophes that loom large over human consciousness today: nuclear conflagration and eco-extinction. These are apocalyptic threats.

It was existential threats that gave birth to the apocalyptic writings of the Bible. Their purpose was to encourage Jews and Christians respectively to hold fast to their faith in the face of oppression and violent persecution. They appealed mightily to the imagination, and it is well-nourished imaginations that the world needs now to deal with its real and present dangers. Scientific facts and hard-nosed diplomacy are vital, but human beings need something more to inspire hope and ignite action. Blessings on the poets, artists and prophets who fire our imaginations.

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

Like the New Testament book of Revelation, that of Daniel is classified as an apocalypse. This term refers to writings that use visions, dreams and coded symbols to encourage people suffering persecution. Often depicting cosmic-scale upheaval and warfare, they promise the ultimate victory of good over evil and the vindication of the just. Their perspective is long-range, but their aim is to boost morale in the here-and-now. Jesus himself engages in apocalyptic talk before his passion and death.

The persecution in question is that of the Jewish people by the Syrian king Antiochus IV Epiphanes who desecrated the Temple and its altar around the year 167 BC. Daniel presents Michael (named again in Rev 12:7) as a celestial warrior-prince guarding the people. The martyrdom of Jewish conscientious objectors gave strength to an emerging belief in the resurrection of the dead. This passage from Daniel contains one of the Old Testament's most explicit references to it. Interestingly, it states that both just and unjust will awaken to an everlasting existence of life or shame, but not all of them.

This is not a difficult text to proclaim, but its apocalyptic style will seem foreign to many in the assembly. The reading itself offers no context or lead-in, so its opening words – “At that time, Michael will stand up” – may not engage the assembly's attention or lead to comprehension. The challenge for readers is to secure that attention and communicate the text's essential message – belief in the resurrection of the dead.

Responsorial Psalm

Ps 15:5, 8–11

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

O 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 confession of faith in the goodness, trustworthiness and incomparable value of God. It is a personal, rather than a communal prayer, arising from the psalmist's own experience. God is declared to be his “portion and cup” and “prize.” The second stanza seems to imply a threat of some kind, perhaps serious illness or danger, from which the psalmist has been delivered. God shows the path of life and promises joy and happiness for ever.

The apostles Peter and Paul both quote from this psalm in their maiden speeches, Peter in Jerusalem on Pentecost Day (Acts 2:25-28), and later on Paul in Pisidian Antioch (13:35). Each of them uses the psalmist's confident assertion – “For you will not leave my soul among the dead, nor let your beloved know decay” – to argue that Jesus' resurrection had scriptural warrant. Whether these words originally reflected an intuition about life after death is open to question.

As the psalm unfolds its focus varies somewhat. Most of the time it is in the form of prayer directed to God, but there are moments where it appears to be addressed to those gathered. Readers need to be mindful of this subtle shift. That said, they should pray the psalm with its author's sincerity and appreciation for God's blessings.

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

Our final excerpt for this year from the letter to the Hebrews (we hear in Year C from chapters 11-12) restates a core theme of the work. Christ's self-sacrifice is an offering made once-and-for-all. It has accomplished its purpose. It is all-sufficient. It never needs to be repeated or supplemented. By contrast, offerings under the old system were and remain ineffective, no matter how often they are made.

All the same, while sin has been definitively forgiven, the victory won by Christ has still to be played out in time. While earthly life continues, the work of overcoming Christ's enemies and of sanctifying the faithful continues.

This reading is more straightforward and simply expressed than some of the earlier passages, even as it provides plenty of grist for the theological mill. Readers should be able to proclaim its authoritative teaching with confidence.

Gospel

The last thing Mark does before commencing his account of Jesus' passion and death is to devote a whole chapter to what Jesus has to say about the end times (his eschatological discourse). It seems to interweave sayings about short-term upheaval, like the destruction of the Temple in the year 70, and the final crisis manifest in cosmic display. These two perspectives overlap in today's text.

The whole speech is very difficult to interpret. Deciphering what the time-frame is, whether these are Jesus' words or those of the early community, what to make of the figurative language, and what faith message might be drawn for today's believers is a complex task.

One thing is clear. It is a word of hope. Whatever the distress on earth or in the heavens, the outcome will be the appearing of the Son of Man to gather together the scattered people of God from the ends of the earth. This is a positive deed with no hint of judgement or destruction. The biblical tradition behind it is the prophet Daniel's vision of a "son of man" coming on the clouds of heaven and being granted eternal and universal sovereignty (7:13-14). Jesus cites this text himself when questioned by the high priest (Mk 14:62).

What remains unclear is when the final consummation will take place. The early Christians clearly expected it to occur within their life-time. After all, Jesus had said that some "would not taste death before they see the kingdom of God coming in power" (Mk 9:2). Two millennia later, though none the wiser, we wait in hope.

An alternative translation of the scripture readings is given here from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV). This may be particularly useful for those in parishes which use the NRSV Lectionary.

THIRTY-THIRD SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

FIRST READING (NRSV)

A reading from the book of Daniel

12:1–3

In the third year of King Cyrus a word was revealed to Daniel.
The word was true and it concerned a great conflict
"At that time Michael, the great prince,
the protector of your people, shall arise.
There shall be a time of anguish,
such as has never occurred
since nations first came into existence.
But at that time your people shall be delivered,
everyone who is found written in the book.
Many of those who sleep
in the dust of the earth shall awake,
some to everlasting life,
and some to shame and everlasting contempt.
"Those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the sky,
and those who lead many to righteousness,
like the stars forever and ever."

SECOND READING (NRSV)

A reading from the letter to the Hebrews

10:11–14, 18

Every priest stands day after day at his service,
offering again and again the same sacrifices
that can never take away sins.
But when Christ had offered for all time
a single sacrifice for sins,
"he sat down at the right hand of God,"
and since then has been waiting
"until his enemies would be made a footstool for his feet."
For by a single offering he has perfected for all time
those who are sanctified.
Where there is forgiveness of sin and lawless deeds,
there is no longer any offering for sin.

GOSPEL (NRSV)

A reading from the holy gospel according to Mark 13:24–32

Jesus was sitting on the Mount of Olives, opposite the temple
and began to talk to his disciples
about the end which is to come.
"In those days, after the time of suffering,
the sun will be darkened,
and the moon will not give its light,
and the stars will be falling from heaven,
and the powers in the heavens will be shaken.
"Then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in clouds'
with great power and glory.
Then he will send out the angels,
and gather his elect from the four winds,
from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven.

"From the fig tree learn its lesson:
as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves,
you know that summer is near.
So also, when you see these things taking place,
you know that he is near, at the very gates.
"Truly I tell you,
this generation will not pass away
until all these things have taken place.
Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.
"But about that day or hour no one knows,
neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son,
but only the Father."

Concluding Prayer

Solemn Blessing (Ordinary Time VI)

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)