

SUNDAY READINGS

READ AT HOME

Lord Jesus Christ, King of the Universe

Year B

24 November 2024



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

Whatever term might have more contemporary appeal than “king,” such as ruler, sovereign, head, lord, leader or something else, there’s a more fundamental issue to grapple with today. The choice of a more agreeable title for Christ the King can’t disguise the fact that Christ does not appear to be in charge of the world at all. A quick survey of popular opinion about who or what rules the world would yield answers like money, arms, multinationals, ideology, algorithms or fate.

Yet by naming Christ as King we want to claim that it’s his defining qualities that have the last say. That means his unconditional love, mercy, freedom of heart, peace, selflessness, truth, faith. Today’s festival invites us to cast off the blinkers that lock our attention onto the dark powers rampant in the world. Jesuit poet Gerard Manley Hopkins would have us see the world “charged with the grandeur of God.” He would have us see ourselves as we are “in God’s eye—Christ—for Christ plays in ten thousand places.”

Today we pray to see Christ at play everywhere in the world, even in its grimmest places. Wherever we find the flame of his light and love, we pledge ourselves to nurture it and make it blaze before the world.

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

This vision of Daniel the prophet contributed to last Sunday's gospel in which Jesus spoke of the end-times. To make good sense of it, one needs to remember that the book of Daniel aimed to give heart to Jewish people enduring persecution from their Greek overlords. It's also helpful to read chapter seven from the beginning. Daniel, we find, has a vision of four beasts in succession, each representing a hostile empire. There's a lion with eagles' wings (Babylon), a bear with tusks (the Medes), a leopard with birds' wings (Persia) and a beast with iron teeth and ten horns (Alexander the Great).

In the fifth vision that is today's text, a human figure appears in the heavenly realm. The ultimate sovereign (the "one of great age") grants universal dominion to this "son of man." This brings an end to foreign oppression and inaugurates a new and everlasting reign. The identity of this human being is open to interpretation. The Christian tradition has seen him as an anticipation of Christ, but nowadays the figure is generally regarded as the angelic representative of the people of Israel. It's worth noting that here the phrase "son of man" is not a title. It simply means human being, whereas in the gospels the name "Son of Man" gives Jesus messianic status.

There is a poetic quality to these visionary words. They invite us to imagine the heavenly scene and be delighted by it. It is the reader's privilege to portray the scene with warm appreciation.

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

A number of psalms – 46/47, 92/93 and 95/96–98/99 – have been dubbed "royal" or "enthronement" psalms. There are differing views on how they are to be understood, but simply put, they celebrate God's kingship. In the case of Psalm 92/93, God is acclaimed as the world's powerful ruler and reliable guarantor of stability.

This is made particularly clear in the two verses that have been omitted from the responsorial psalm. They depict God in command over the turbulent waters that symbolised the chaos that could engulf the world. As the psalm stands, the first two stanzas affirm God's eternal majesty and power. The third offers praise for the security that God's decrees and presence bring in a perilous and unjust world.

There are a few things for readers to note. The usual care needs to be taken with the two-part response so that it is heard in full and repeated as a double declaration. The stanzas are in three, rather than the more common four, line format. The lines are short and ought not be hurried through. The tone throughout is one of acclamation.

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.

Second Reading

As it appears in the lectionary, this passage from the book of Revelation (or Apocalypse) serves as a stand-alone confession of faith. Originally it was the latter part of the author's opening greeting, the earlier part of which has been omitted.

Jesus Christ is immediately hailed with three titles, each one corresponding in turn to a phase of his mission – the death to which his faithful witnessing led, his resurrection from the dead, and his establishment as supreme ruler.

The reading is something of a tapestry of themes from other scripture texts. There's forgiveness of sins through the blood of Christ (Mt 26:28; Eph 1:7) as well as believers becoming kings and priests (Ex 19:6; 1 Pt 2:9). Reference to the one "coming on the clouds" alludes to Daniel's vision (7:13-14). There's almost a direct quote from the prophet Zechariah. He spoke poignantly of the people looking upon and mourning the one whom they had pierced (12:10).

The reading finishes with an oracle spoken by God, "the Alpha and the Omega," the Almighty One "who is, who was, and who is to come" – in other words, the one who is all in all. In brief this is a splendidly appreciative profession of faith. It naturally invites a spirited proclamation.

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.'

Gospel

Jesus' trial before Pilate is central to the passion narrative that we hear in full on Good Friday. John structures it in seven scenes, today's reading being the second. The first has Pilate outside his residence in a charged exchange with the Jewish authorities. They make it plain they want Jesus executed but need the Roman governor's authorisation. Faced with this demand, he retreats indoors to interrogate Jesus.

The episode is laced with the irony that characterises John's gospel. Ostensibly Pilate has all the power but Jesus disconcerts him. The interrogator finds himself questioned. Pilate, keen to clarify the accusation that Jesus is a criminal, introduces the subject of kingship. Jesus concedes that he is a king but of a sort that Pilate proves unable to comprehend. Jesus' kingdom is not a worldly one of military might. It is a realm of truth whose origins lie beyond the world. Pilate's contemptuous reply, "Truth? What is that?" has rather unfortunately been omitted from the lectionary text.

This is a conversation of great import. Excised from the passion narrative, it may not have the same impact but it's striking nonetheless. We are under no illusions as to who is in charge. Jesus' serene self-assurance contrasts with Pilate's anxiety. Real power is invested in him who is "the way, the truth and the life" (14:6). This short text is tense with drama. It deserves decisive proclamation.

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.

OUR LORD JESUS CHRIST, KING OF THE UNIVERSE

FIRST READING (NRSV)

A reading from the book of the prophet Daniel 7:13–14

I, Daniel, had a dream and visions as I lay in bed.
As I watched in the night visions,
I saw one like a human being
coming with the clouds of heaven.
And he came to the Ancient One
and was presented before him.
To him was given dominion and glory and kingship,
that all peoples, nations and languages
should serve him.
His dominion is an everlasting dominion
that shall not pass away,
and his kingship is one
that shall never be destroyed.

SECOND READING (NRSV)

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

Jesus Christ is the faithful witness,
the firstborn of the dead,
and the ruler of the kings of the earth.
To him who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood,
and made us to be a kingdom,
priests serving his God and Father;
to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.
Look! He is coming with the clouds;
every eye will see him,
even those who pierced him;
and on his account all the tribes of the earth will lament.
So it is to be. Amen.
"I am the Alpha and the Omega," says the Lord God,
"who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty."

GOSPEL (NRSV)

A reading from the holy gospel according to John 18:33–37

Pilate asked Jesus,
"Are you the King of the Jews?"
Jesus answered,
"Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?"
Pilate replied,
"I am not a Jew, am I?"
Your own nation and the chief priests have handed you over to me.
What have you done?"
Jesus answered,
"My kingdom is not from this world.
if my kingdom were from this world,
my followers would be fighting
to keep me from being handed over to the Jewish authorities.
But as it is, my kingdom is not from here."

Pilate asked him,
"So you are a king?"
Jesus answered,
"You say that I am a king.
For this I was born,
and for this I came into the world,
to testify to the truth.
Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice."

Concluding Prayer

Solemn Blessing (Ordinary Time I)

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)