

# SUNDAY READINGS

## READ AT HOME

Lord Jesus Christ, King of the Universe

Year A

22 November 2020



### 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 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.

## First Reading

In an agricultural society like ancient Israel it was natural for God to be imagined as shepherd of his people. In turn those who ruled the people in God's name – the kings above all – were thought of as shepherds. But many of them failed in their responsibilities. Instead of caring for the sheep entrusted to them they preyed on them. The prophet Ezekiel was called to prophesy against these false shepherds. Because they had betrayed their flock, the Lord would shepherd the people himself.

Chapter 34 begins with the condemnation of Israel's rulers and goes on to present the Lord as the true shepherd. The comprehensive description of the Lord's shepherding is heart-warming. The Lord will care for his people with love and compassion, will keep them safe and ensure that they flourish. Christian congregations will find an immediate connection between this and what Jesus has to say about himself as the good shepherd.

It is worth noting one major difference in translation: the Jerusalem Bible has "I shall watch over the fat and the healthy" while the NRSV has "the fat and the strong I will destroy". The last verse of the reading leads into another section in the book of Ezekiel but has been added on here to connect with the gospel story.

Readers will see that they have a wonderfully encouraging text to proclaim. They should deliver it with warmth and love.

## 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.**

## Responsorial Psalm

The choice of the psalm for today – Psalm 22/23 – is obviously dictated by the shepherding theme of the first reading. This much loved psalm appears several times in the course of the liturgical year, with differing responses. This time the psalm and response are the same as for the Fourth Sunday of Easter. As noted previously, this much loved psalm presents a challenge for readers. Apart from dealing with verses of different lengths, they should proclaim the all-too-familiar words as if they had just been discovered. They need to bring a firm freshness to the text and avoid any hint of sentimentality.

The images are strong and plentiful: shepherding, green pastures, restful waters, the valley of darkness, a banquet, the Lord's own house. One after the other they build up a heart-warming sense of God's personal and protective love. This should be a joy to read.

## **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 comes from chapter 15 of 1 Corinthians. Except for an additional verse it is the same as that for the feast of the Assumption, as is the commentary.

Paul spends the whole chapter expounding on the resurrection. He does so in full flight. The thoughts seem to tumble out one after the other as Paul's rabbinical imagination gives birth to them. The result is a theological tapestry woven from many strands.

Part of the background to today's text is the story of the first man and woman as it's told in the first chapters of Genesis. Paul attributes death to the so-called "fall" of Adam, but life comes with Christ. Another element from Jewish tradition is Paul's reference to "first-fruits". It was the practice in ancient Israel (attested in various texts of the Pentateuch) to dedicate the first part of the land's produce to God. This was a way of remembering and acknowledging that the land and its blessings were in the first place God's gifts to Israel.

Paul envisages a process in which death ("the last of the enemies") is gradually overcome – first by Christ and then at the end for all human beings – until the victorious Christ hands everything over to the Father. What Paul means by saying that "the Son himself will be subject . . . to the One who subjected all things to him" remains a matter of debate.

Readers would be well advised to read through and rehearse this text several times. It needs to be proclaimed rather slowly to enable the congregation to follow the line of Paul's thought. For an inclusive language rendition of the text, go to the NRSV.

## **Gospel**

Matthew alone recounts the parable of the sheep and the goats. Today it serves as a commentary on the last verse of the reading from Ezekiel, "I will judge between sheep and sheep, between rams and goats".

The parable identifies the Son of Man (a title Jesus uses about himself) with a king who holds court and passes life-and-death judgement. In that respect Jesus is aligning himself with the conventional practice of kings and rulers. But the criteria he uses to make his judgements are entirely unconventional as far as the tyrants of the ancient world were concerned.

What merits eternal life is practical outreach to people suffering distress of one kind or another – an outreach not motivated by the hope of reward but by compassion for the needy. Those who show such neighbourly love are focussed on the present reality of life around them, not on other-worldly concerns.

The feast of Christ the King may take place against a horizon of glory, but it anchors us firmly in the world as it is. As the liturgical year comes to a close we are left with a question: are we as enterprising in our care for others as we are in advancing our own interests?

## Concluding Prayers

Almighty and all-merciful God,  
lover of the human race, healer of all our wounds,  
in whom there is no shadow of death,  
save us in this time of crisis;  
grant wisdom and courage to our leaders;  
watch over all medical people  
as they tend the sick and work for a cure;  
stir in us a sense of solidarity beyond all isolation;  
if our doors are closed, let our hearts be open.  
By the power of your love destroy the virus of fear,  
that hope may never die  
and the light of Easter, the triumph of life,  
may shine upon us and the whole world.  
Through Jesus Christ, the Lord risen from the dead,  
who lives and reigns for ever and ever.  
Amen.

Holy Mary, health of the sick, pray for us.  
St Joseph, guardian of us all, pray for us.

*(Most Rev. Mark Coleridge, Archbishop of Brisbane)*

*or*

Gracious God,  
We give thanks anew for your providence and presence.  
We prayerfully seek your grace, amidst COVID-19 here and overseas.  
We pray for those in need of healing.  
We pray for your peace with those who are anxious or grieving.  
We pray you will continue to strengthen and sustain  
all those who are serving in response.  
We pray for your Holy Spirit's discernment  
amidst the many choices and decisions  
facing our national, community and medical leaders.  
We pray we each might see quickly what more we can do  
to help those who are vulnerable.  
This prayer for our nation in the family of nations,  
with all that is on our hearts,  
we gather now and pray  
through Jesus Christ our Lord.  
Amen.

*(Ecumenical prayer from the National Council of Churches. We have been invited to pray this prayer at 7pm each day.)*