

SUNDAY READINGS

READ AT HOME

33rd Sunday in Ordinary Time

Year A

15 November 2020



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

Predictions of the end of the world seem to occur with remarkable frequency. So far they have proved false in every case. What is striking is that they are almost always fuelled by fear and the threat of doom.

Christians have been living for over two thousand years in expectation of the end times, and still do. Sometimes this expectation has been shot through with great anxiety, even terror, but this is an aberration. The only authentic Christian stance is one of hope.

We know nothing about how or when the world as we know it will come to an end, but it is a core Christian conviction that this end will be a consummation not a catastrophe. God will ultimately bring his loving purposes for creation and humankind to fulfilment.

The vigilance that the writers of the New Testament call for is not motivated by fear but by desire – the desire to be alert and awake and ready to live fully in the present moment.

A reading from the book of Proverbs

31:10–13, 19–20, 30–31

A perfect wife – who can find her?
She is far beyond the price of pearls.
Her husband's heart has confidence in her,
from her he will derive no little profit.
Advantage and not hurt she brings him
all the days of her life.
She is always busy with wool and with flax,
she does her work with eager hands.
She sets her hands to the distaff,
her fingers grasp the spindle.
She holds out her hand to the poor,
she opens her arms to the needy.
Charm is deceitful, and beauty empty;
the woman who is wise is the one to praise.
Give her a share in what her hands have worked for,
and let her works tell her praises at the city gates.

First Reading

The text selected for the first reading may come as a surprise – for two reasons. Firstly, a poem in praise of a capable wife seems an unlikely choice for a time in the liturgical year when we focus on the second coming. And secondly, praising the attributes of a worthy woman because she is an asset to her husband may not appeal to modern sensibilities. Each of these issues deserves attention.

The key to each of these puzzles is the word “enterprise”. The text from Proverbs depicts the ideal wife as a woman of initiative and enterprise. This anticipates Jesus' message in today's gospel parable. He urges us to be bold and enterprising while we wait for the end times.

And because the context of the poem is that of a patriarchal society it is all the more remarkable that the ideal woman should be depicted as so independent and enterprising. Texts like these that need to be interpreted in relation to their times remind us that all scripture is historically conditioned.

The reading is composed of short two-line units. This should make the task of proclamation relatively straightforward. Each unit should be given its own time and emphasis. The overall tone is one of positive appreciation.

Responsorial Psalm

Ps 127:1–5

R. Happy are those who fear the Lord.
O blessed are those who fear the Lord
and walk in his ways!
By the labour of your hands you shall eat.
You will be happy and prosper. **R.**
Your wife like a fruitful vine
in the heart of your house;
your children like shoots of the olive,
around your table. **R.**
Indeed thus shall be blessed
the man who fears the Lord.
May the Lord bless you from Zion
in a happy Jerusalem
all the days of your life. **R.**

Responsorial Psalm

Psalm 127/128 is one of a collection of short psalms called the “Songs of Ascents” because of their possible use by pilgrims on their way up to the temple. They recount the blessings that come from living in obedience to the Lord – a happy family life at home and peace and prosperity in the land.

The response is short and simple, from the first line of the psalm. Apart from a short final verse, the lectionary employs the whole of the psalm. Most of the lines are quite short; readers need to be careful not to run on to the next line too quickly. They also need to be aware that the last verse has a fifth line.

The prayer is clearly offered from a male perspective. It is “the man who fears the Lord” who will be blessed with wife and children and with the fruit of his labours.

A reading from the first letter of St Paul to the Thessalonians 5:1–6

You will not be expecting us to write anything to you, brothers, about ‘times and seasons,’ since you know very well that the Day of the Lord is going to come like a thief in the night. It is when people are saying, ‘How quiet and peaceful it is,’ that the worst suddenly happens, as suddenly as labour pains come on a pregnant woman; and there will be no way for anybody to evade it.

But it is not as if you live in the dark, my brothers, for that Day to overtake you like a thief. No, you are all sons of light and sons of the day: we do not belong to the night or to darkness, so we should not go on sleeping, as everyone else does, but stay wide awake and sober.

A reading from the holy Gospel according to Matthew 25:14–30

Jesus spoke this parable to his disciples: ‘The kingdom of heaven is like a man on his way abroad who summoned his servants and entrusted his property to them. To one he gave five talents, to another two, to a third one; each in proportion to his ability. Then he set out. [The man who had received the five talents promptly went and traded with them and made five more. The man who had received two made two more in the same way. But the man who had received one went off and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master’s money.] Now a long time after, the master of those servants came back and went through his accounts with them. The man who had received the five talents came forward bringing five more. “Sir”, he said “you entrusted me with five talents; here are five more that I have made.” His master said to him, “Well done, good and faithful servant; you have shown you can be faithful in small things, I will trust you with greater; come and join in your master’s happiness.” [Next the man with the two talents came forward. “Sir,” he said “you entrusted me with two talents; here are two more that I have made.” His master said to him, “Well done, good and faithful servant; you have shown you can be faithful in small things, I will trust you with greater; come and join in your master’s happiness.” Last came forward the man who had the one talent. “Sir,” said he “I had heard you were a hard man, reaping where you have not sown and gathering where you have not scattered; so I was afraid, and I went off and hid your talent in the ground. Here it is; it was yours, you have it back.” But his master answered him, “You wicked and lazy servant! So you knew that I reap where I have not sown and gather where I have not scattered? Well then, you should have deposited my money with the bankers, and on my return I would have recovered my capital with interest. So now, take the talent from him and give it to the man who has the five talents. For to everyone who has will be given more, and he will have more than enough; but from the man who has not, even what he has will be taken away. As for this good-for-nothing servant, throw him out into the dark, where there will be weeping and grinding of teeth.”’]

[Short Form: omit text in brackets.]

Second Reading

The final extract from 1 Thessalonians comes from the last chapter of the letter. It is part of a whole section in which Paul is addressing issues relating to the end times: death, resurrection, and the second coming of Christ. The Christians at Thessalonica have become agitated with speculation as to when all this might come about. Paul urges them to be sober and vigilant, not to live in darkness but in the light of day.

At first it appears that Paul is feeding their fear: “the Day of the Lord is going to come like a thief in the night”. It is when people become complacent “that the worst suddenly happens”. But the image of labour pains implies the happy outcome of birth. And if the Thessalonians live in the light, then the Day of the Lord will *not* overtake them like a thief. They “are all sons [NRSV: children] of light and sons of the day”.

The challenge for Christians continues to this day – to live in vivid expectation of the Lord’s return, not with fear but with hope, not retreating from the world but engaging with it. This is Paul’s message that readers have the privilege of communicating to the congregation.

Gospel

The gospel reading comes in a full and a shorter form. The choice between them is not easy. The full version is quite long and rather repetitious (as one might expect for a text passed on by generations of storytellers) and has a troubling conclusion, but the short version is so truncated that the power of the story is greatly diminished. This commentary presumes the longer text.

The parable is the second of the last three that Jesus tells before the beginning of his final ordeal. It does not speak directly of the end time but of how his disciples should live while they await the end – in a word, with enterprise.

The word “talent” is open to misinterpretation by a modern audience, especially as the master in the story distributes the talents “each according to his ability”. Here a talent is not an ability or gift that a person has but an extraordinary large sum of money, a life’s fortune. The slaves entrusted with the five and the two talents respectively are rewarded for their enterprise. So far this is a simple lesson that of itself might not generate much discussion.

It is the conclusion that is provocative. What are we to make of the treatment meted out to the slave who did not dare venture with his one talent? Is the “moral” of the story (verse 29) an operational principle of the kingdom of God? These are questions that still engage us.

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.)