

Second Reading, 27th to 34th Sundays : Year B, 2021

Letter to the Hebrews

In Year B we read passages from chapters 2–10 of the Letter to the Hebrews between the 27th and 33rd Sundays in Ordinary Time. On the final Sunday in the liturgical year, the Feast of Christ the King, the second reading is from the Book of Revelation or Apocalypse.

Excerpts from the twelve chapters of the Letter to the Hebrews are also read every second year from Monday in the First Week through to Saturday in the Fourth Week of Ordinary Time.

In addition, a passage from Hebrews is read every year on Christmas Day and Good Friday. In Year B Hebrews is also read on the Feast of the Holy Family, the 5th Sunday in Lent, and the Feast of the Body and Blood of Christ; and in Year C, from the 19th to the 22nd Sundays (from chapters 11–12), as well as on the 4th Sunday in Advent and the Feast of the Ascension.

Readings for Ordinary Time – Year B

Twenty-seventh Sunday, Hebrews 2:9–11

Identifying Christ as the key to the Scriptures, Hebrews reinterprets Ps 8 to affirm that Jesus' human suffering and death have been graced by God and are effective for all people. It is by God's design that Jesus brings all people to salvation through the cross by which Jesus was made 'perfect, through suffering'. Christ and all humanity share a common origin in God.

Twenty-eighth Sunday, Hebrews 4:12–13

Echoing various Old Testament texts, the sacred author highlights that God's word is living, effective and 'cuts like a double-edged sword'. God's word is also creative and conveys God's judgement. Only God knows what is going on in the heart of each person; nothing is hidden from God.

Twenty-ninth Sunday, Hebrews 4:14–16

The sacred author begins this sermon with the key statement of belief we profess: Jesus is the Son of God. Jesus, the sinless high priest, still feels our human weakness. For this reason we can be confident that 'when we are need of help' and ask for mercy, we will find grace and receive mercy.

Thirtieth Sunday, Hebrews 5:1–6

The author of Hebrews compares Israel's high priest from the tribe of Levi with Jesus, the High Priest: as mediators; as people able to empathise with human failings; as people who are not self-selected but are chosen by God. Jesus is superior on all counts because God has designated him the eternal High Priest.

Thirty-first Sunday, Hebrews 7:23–28

These two reflections on the priesthood of Jesus highlight, firstly, that Jesus' priesthood is eternal and unbroken when compared with the Levitical priesthood. Jesus is always there to intercede for us. In vv 26–28, the last reflection on Jesus' priesthood as patterned on 'the order of Melchizedek' (v 17), Hebrews emphasises that Jesus' priesthood is confirmed by God's oath and that Jesus' sacrifice is made once for all, by 'the Son who is made perfect for ever'.

Thirty-second Sunday, Hebrews 9:24–28

Once again, Hebrews employs the image of the Day of Atonement as a 'type' of the death of Jesus. On that day, each year, the high priest offered sacrifices for his own sins and those of the people. Christ, however, by offering the sacrifice of his life, took away sin 'once and for

all'. At his second coming, Christ will complete the salvation that has been already begun, for all 'those who are waiting for him'.

Thirty-third Sunday, Hebrews 10:11–14, 18

The sacred author concludes the presentation on Jesus' priestly act, begun in Chapter 8, by repeating that the sacrifices of the past were incapable of removing sin. Jesus, however, by the singular sacrifice of his life, has taken away sin and been placed 'at the right hand of God'. Believers of all epochs benefit from the eternal effects of Jesus' sacrifice.

Feast of Christ the King, Apocalypse 1:5–8

The opening greeting to this letter comes not just from John but also from Jesus Christ who is linked to us by kinship ('First-born from the dead'), and as ruler. The blessing follows, and it acknowledges how Jesus has acted for us by his sacrifice, and what this has achieved so that we might serve 'his God and Father'. The final verse draws us into the mystery of the Almighty God, and declares God's sovereignty as the beginning and end of all things.

Background to the Letter to the Hebrews

Among the New Testament books, many scholars consider that the Letter to the Hebrews stands out for its brilliance. It is often regarded not as a letter but as a type of highly literary sermon, expounding a central theological point: Christ is both the perfect sacrifice for sins and the priest who offers himself as a sacrifice; He died for us and for our sins.

The author of Hebrews is unknown, but scholars agree it was not Paul. This much was known from very early days. However, we know from the text that the author had a sophisticated knowledge of the Old Testament in its Greek translation (the 'Septuagint'), wrote high quality Greek, and understood the techniques of Jewish biblical interpretation.

Without any great degree of certainty, scholars tend to believe that the letter was probably written to Jewish Christians who may have been discouraged and wavering in the face of suffering. They may have been a community in Rome or Jerusalem. The letter may have been composed in the late 50s or early 60s, but could have been as late as the 80s.

Main Themes and Structure of Hebrews

This is one of many ways to summarise the key themes in this complex sermon or letter with its detailed, underlying structure:

- The sacrificial nature of Christ's death and the value of his atonement for sin
- Christ is both the perfect sacrifice for sins and the priest who offered that sacrifice
- Christ is the key to the Old Testament and his priesthood completes the Old Testament priesthood
- Understand Christ's sacrifice and priesthood revitalises Christian faith and practice.

The overall framework of the letter can be sketched out as:

- Introduction (1:1–3)
- Superiority of Jesus as God's Son: over the angels (1:4–2:18); over Moses (3:1–4:13)
- Superiority of Jesus' priesthood (4:14–7:28)
- Superiority of Jesus' sacrifice and his ministry; inauguration of a new covenant (8:1–10:18)
- Faith and endurance: availing oneself of Jesus' priestly work (10:19–12:29)
- Injunctions about religious practice for individuals and communities (13:1–19)
- Conclusion: blessing and greetings (13:20–25)

Background to the Book of the Apocalypse

The *Book of the Apocalypse* (also called the *Book of Revelation*), provokes reactions from both Christian and non-Christian readers—and much confusion. It is apocalyptic literature and deeply rooted in Old Testament prophetic and wisdom traditions. Apocalyptic texts often emerged at times of persecution. At the heart of this book is the call to conversion and a message of consolation in times of distress. The author was named John but he was not the apostle St John, nor the author of the Fourth Gospel, nor of the three Johannine letters. He was probably an early Jewish Christian prophet writing in the eastern Mediterranean area, and possibly from the island of Patmos. Some scholars believe the book was written towards the end of Emperor Domitian's reign (A.D. 95–96).

The *Book of the Apocalypse* includes much repetition as it recounts visions, some of which occur in the heavens and others on earth. There are also 'auditions' where the author recounts what he has heard, often from a messenger of God such as an angel, as well as the use of many symbolic numbers. Such elements are common in much of the apocalyptic literature.

Further Reading

Raymond E Brown S.S., *Christ in the Gospels of the Liturgical Year*. Chapter 34: The Gospel According to Mark. Liturgical Press

Raymond E Brown S.S., *An Introduction to the New Testament*. Chapter 32, Letter (Epistle) to the Hebrews; Chapter 37, Book of Revelation (The Apocalypse). Doubleday

Harold A Buetow, *Thirst for Life*, Meditations/homilies for the Weekdays of the Year, Vol 1, St Mark. St Paul's (introductory notes on Hebrews)

Harold A Buetow, *Rejoicing in Hope*, Meditations/homilies for the Weekdays of the Year, Vol 3, St Luke. St Paul's (introductory notes on the apocalyptic and the Book of Revelation)

Catherine A Cory, *The Book of Revelation*. Vol 12, New Testament. New Collegeville Bible Commentary. Liturgical Press

David N Freedman (ed.), *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible*.

Daniel J Harrington S.J., *The Letter to the Hebrews*. Vol 11, New Testament. New Collegeville Bible Commentary. Liturgical Press

John J Pilch, *The Cultural World of the Apostles*. The Second Reading, Year by Year. Year B. Liturgical Press