

SUNDAY READINGS

READ AT HOME

The Nativity of the Lord (Dawn)

Year C

25 December 2021



Collect

Grant, we pray, almighty God,
that, as we are bathed in the new radiance of your incarnate Word,
the light of faith, which illumines our minds,
may also shine through in our deeds.

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

It's fair to say that the texts for Mass at dawn on Christmas Day are rarely used. It's possible that only monastic communities and the like celebrate this liturgy. People who choose to take part in a Christmas Day service are more likely to look for a Mass later in the morning.

The entire liturgy of the word is relatively short. While there's no obvious connection between the readings and the dawn of day, except in the responsorial psalm, they do shed light on the mystery of the incarnation.

As Isaiah prophesied, the coming of the Saviour is such a blessing for God's people that they are made altogether new. Christian believers, Paul reminds Titus, are reborn by the free gift of the Spirit in the waters of baptism. The continuation of Luke's infancy narrative reminds the baptised that they have a two-fold mission – to proclaim the good news like the shepherds and to prayerfully ponder on what it means in their hearts.

For anyone moved to meditate on these words on Christmas morning, there's rich food for thought and every reason to give thanks to God.

A reading from the prophet Isaiah**62:11–12****First Reading**

This the Lord proclaims
to the ends of the earth:

Say to the daughter of Zion, 'Look,
your saviour comes,
the prize of his victory with him,
his trophies before him'.
They shall be called 'The Holy People',
'The Lord's Redeemed'.
And you shall be called 'The-sought-after',
'City-not-forsaken'.

The final eleven chapters of the book of the prophet Isaiah are considered to have been composed by later disciples writing in the spirit of the great master. They offer comfort and consolation to the Israelites who have returned home from exile. Today's short reading is an enthusiastic oracle of encouragement. While addressed to the struggling community it has universal implications. It is a proclamation "to the ends of the earth."

Through the prophet God promises a victorious saviour whose arrival will transform the fortunes of the people. They and the city of Zion will be newly named "holy," "redeemed," "sought-after," and "not-forsaken."

Brief as it is, the reading is infused with joyful hope. The listening congregation is unlikely to be aware of its historical context and would have to attend carefully to note the one explicit allusion to Christmas in the phrase "your saviour comes." But they cannot mistake its buoyant spirit. Readers should proclaim the text accordingly. Its brevity calls for a moderate pace, with pauses that allow the assembly to hear each of the new names given clear and distinct emphasis.

Responsorial Psalm**Ps 96:1, 6, 11–12**

R. A light will shine on us this day:
the Lord is born for us.

The Lord is king, let earth rejoice,
the many coastlands be glad.
The skies proclaim his justice;
all peoples see his glory. **R.**

Light shines forth for the just
and joy for the upright of heart.
Rejoice, you just, in the Lord;
give glory to his holy name. **R.**

Responsorial Psalm

Psalm 96/97 appears a number of times in the Sunday Lectionary, but never so briefly as here. It's quite unusual for the responsorial psalm to consist of only two verses, but today it's all of a piece with the readings, none of which is long. It seems that the Dawn Mass on Christmas Day was designed to be expeditious.

The response too is unusual. It's a hybrid that blends the psalm's reference to light with a set of words that bind it to today's feast: "A light will shine on us this day: the Lord is born for us." Some translations, such as the NRSV, use the more apt phrase, "Light dawns."

The psalm as a whole is classified as a "royal psalm," celebrating the universal dominion of Israel's God over nature and idols. For this God is acclaimed and glorified by the faithful. As always with a two-part response, readers will need to use vocal cues that deter the assembly from responding prematurely after the first phrase. The simple and straightforward verses should be proclaimed joyfully.

A reading from the letter of St Paul to Titus

3:4–7

When the kindness and love of God our saviour for mankind were revealed, it was not because he was concerned with any righteous actions we might have done ourselves; it was for no reason except his own compassion that he saved us, by means of the cleansing water of rebirth and by renewing us with the Holy Spirit which he has so generously poured over us through Jesus Christ our saviour. He did this so that we should be justified by his grace, to become heirs looking forward to inheriting eternal life.

A reading from the holy Gospel according to Luke

2:15–20

Now when the angels had gone from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, 'Let us go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened which the Lord has made known to us.' So they hurried away and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in the manger. When they saw the child they repeated what they had been told about him, and everyone who heard it was astonished at what the shepherds had to say. As for Mary, she treasured all these things and pondered them in her heart. And the shepherds went back glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen; it was exactly as they had been told.

Second Reading

The second reading, like that for Mass During the Night, is from Paul's letter to Titus. Readers may wish to refer back to the introductory comments made there.

Anyone looking for clues in support of Pauline authorship will find them readily enough. It is not by our "righteous actions" that we are saved but by God's "own compassion." We are "justified by his grace" and thus "become heirs . . . to eternal life." These declarations are entirely in accord with Paul's core teaching in his letters to the Romans and the Galatians. Here it is linked with baptism by water and Spirit. The reading feels rather like a summary of Paul's message. In fact the verse that follows the selected passage reads: "This is doctrine you can rely on."

Also Pauline in character are the long sentences that elaborate on the fundamental principles he is stating. In itself the logic is not complex, but readers will need to prepare well. The assembly should be able to hear clearly the key points being made in the main clauses and not to get lost when these are developed in the subordinate clauses. The reasoning behind the choice of this passage for Christmas Day isn't glaringly obvious, but there is reference to God's love and kindness being revealed. The emphasis on God's saving initiative does, of course, fully accord with the mystery of the incarnation.

Gospel

The visit of the shepherds to Bethlehem to see the Christ-child for themselves rounds out Luke's account of Jesus' birth. The main part of the story is told at the night Mass. This complementary section serves several purposes. Firstly, it buttresses the shepherds' credibility. Notorious for being of unreliable character, their report of the angel's appearance to them and of heavenly choirs would have been heard with great scepticism. They may well have doubted its veracity themselves. But now they can testify in their own right.

Secondly, it signals Luke's interest in people on the margins, people who are poor and powerless. They are the ones whose situation is reversed, as Mary's *Magnificat* asserts. They are the ones who welcome God's visitation and witness to God's grace. In this case it's the shepherds who can't stop themselves from "glorifying and praising God."

Thirdly, it allows Luke to reinforce the image of Mary as a woman of wisdom, prayer and faith. In one brief sentence Luke reminds his readers of the portrait he has painted of her in the story of the annunciation. In lovely counterpoint Luke has depicted the shepherds in apostolic mode, and Mary in contemplative mode, implying that both are essential features of the Christian community.

A Christmas Blessing

May the God of infinite goodness,
who by the Incarnation of his Son has driven darkness from the world
and by that glorious Birth has illumined this most holy day,
drive far from us the darkness of vice
and illumine our hearts with the light of virtue.

Amen.

May God, who willed that the great joy
of his Son's saving Birth
be announced to shepherds by the Angel,
fill our minds with the gladness he gives
and make us heralds of his Gospel.

Amen.

May God, who by the Incarnation
brought together the earthly and heavenly realm,
fill us with the gift of his peace and favour
and make us sharers with the Church in heaven.

Amen.

And may almighty God bless us,
the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Amen.

(Adapted from the Solemn Blessing for The Nativity of the Lord, Roman Missal p 710)