

SUNDAY READINGS

READ AT HOME

The Nativity of the Lord (Day)

Year B

25 December 2020



Collect

O God, who wonderfully created the dignity of human nature
and still more wonderfully restored it,
grant, we pray,
that we may share in the divinity of Christ,
who humbled himself to share in our humanity.
Who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, for ever and ever.
Amen.

Readings and Commentaries

Those who attend Mass after dawn on Christmas Day are blessed with a wonderful combination of texts – an ecstatic outburst from Isaiah followed by the majestic overtures that open the letter to the Hebrews and the gospel of John. Whether ready or not (remembering that many Christmas Day Mass-goers are “special occasion” worshippers), they find themselves guests at a scriptural and theological feast.

From the poetic exclamation of Isaiah – “How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of one who brings good news” – through the attention-grabbing opening of Hebrews – “At various times in the past and in various different ways, God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets” – to the dramatic declaration of John – “The Word was made flesh, he lived among us”, we are blessed with profound and beautiful texts. The light that shone mysteriously in the dark of Christmas night has become the splendid sun of a summer’s day.

A reading from the prophet Isaiah

52:7–10

How beautiful on the mountains,
are the feet of one who brings good news,
who heralds peace, brings happiness,
proclaims salvation,
and tells Zion,
'Your God is king!'

Listen! Your watchmen raise their voices,
they shout for joy together,
for they see the Lord face to face,
as he returns to Zion.

Break into shouts of joy together,
you ruins of Jerusalem;
for the Lord is consoling his people,
redeeming Jerusalem.

The Lord bares his holy arm
in the sight of all the nations,
and all the ends of the earth shall see
the salvation of our God.

First Reading

If we have come to Mass on Christmas Day with many things on our minds – gifts, meals, relatives, friends, plans and preparations – then Isaiah bids us let go of this busy mental activity. He appeals directly to our imaginations with a poetic vision.

He sees watchmen high up on the walls of the city, on the lookout for messengers bringing news. The people seem to have lost heart, they feel abandoned, they wonder what has become of God's promise of faithful love. Longing for a sign of hope, the sentries catch sight of the Lord on his way to Jerusalem; his appearance promises the blessings of comfort, peace and happiness. No wonder the prophet breaks out in a spontaneous shout of joy: "How beautiful are the feet of one who brings good news"!

The reading builds up towards a climax with a series of short phrases – "who heralds peace, brings happiness, proclaims salvation" – culminating in "'Your God is king!'" These phrases should not be hurried but proclaimed joyfully with gradually increasing emphasis.

The direct command – "Listen!" – should reinforce the attention that the reader has already secured from the congregation. Another imperative follows shortly after, this time bidding praise: "Break into shouts of joy together".

All of this adds to the dramatic power of the reading as it heads towards the final declaration: "all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God". Listeners should be in no doubt that the reading has arrived at its triumphant conclusion.

Responsorial Psalm

Ps 97:1–6

R. All the ends of the earth have seen the saving power of God.

Sing a new song to the Lord
for he has worked wonders.
His right hand and his holy arm
have brought salvation. **R.**

The Lord has made known his salvation;
has shown his justice to the nations.
He has remembered his truth and love
for the house of Israel. **R.**

All the ends of the earth have seen
the salvation of our God.
Shout to the Lord all the earth,
ring out your joy. **R.**

Sing psalms to the Lord with the harp,
with the sound of music.
With trumpets and the sound of the horn
acclaim the King, the Lord. **R.**

Responsorial Psalm

The response to the psalm immediately echoes the finale of the first reading, but with one significant change: "shall see" becomes "have seen". This is not simply a Christian claim that the expectations of the prophets of old have been fulfilled in the birth of Christ, though this belief is what we celebrate at Christmas. The assertion that "All the ends of the earth have seen the salvation of our God" was already being made several centuries before Christ, in the very psalm we pray today.

The psalm is clearly a hymn of joyful praise that invites the reader to proclaim it in the same spirit. This does not mean the verses should be hurried through. Each line and stanza should be read in such a way that the whole congregation is drawn into its exultant mood.

A reading from the letter to the Hebrews 1:1–6

At various times in the past and in various different ways, God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets; but in our own time, the last days, he has spoken to us through his Son, the Son that he has appointed to inherit everything and through whom he made everything there is. He is the radiant light of God's glory and the perfect copy of his nature, sustaining the universe by his powerful command; and now that he has destroyed the defilement of sin, he has gone to take his place in heaven at the right hand of divine Majesty. So he is now as far above the angels as the title which he has inherited is higher than their own name.

God has never said to any angel: You are my Son, today I have become your father, or I will be a father to him and he a son to me. Again, when he brings the First-born into the world, he says: Let all the angels of God worship him.

Second Reading

There is much about the letter to the Hebrews that even today remains unclear: who the author was, for whom the letter was written, and where and when it was composed. There is no doubt, however, that its literary style is the most sophisticated in the New Testament.

The letter (really an exhortation) has all the rhetorical flourish of an orator in full flight. Its overall purpose is also clear – to argue that Jesus Christ is uniquely human and divine and has once and for all won free access to God for faithful believers. The author draws heavily on both Jewish scripture and Greek philosophy to make his case. All these features of Hebrews are evident in the opening verses that form today's reading.

Once more readers will need to read and rehearse the text several times to be able to proclaim it well. It will be helpful for the reader to "deconstruct" the long sentences, to pull them apart and uncover the core statements: "[God] has spoken to us through his Son"; "He is the radiant light of God's glory"; "he has gone to take his place in heaven"; "he is . . . far above the angels".

These opening statements paint a grand portrait of God's work and of his Son. They owe much to the Jewish tradition of Wisdom and prepare the way for what we are to hear about the Word of God in the gospel.

Later in the reading the author gets down to the business of arguing for the supremacy of the Son over all other beings, including the angels. The point of this may be lost on a contemporary audience but it was clearly a matter of great concern to the author. The concluding sentences may be read in a lower key but still with conviction.

**A reading from the holy Gospel according to John
1:1–18**

In the beginning was the Word:
the Word was with God and the Word was God.
He was with God in the beginning.
Through him all things came to be,
not one thing had its being but through him.
All that came to be had life in him
and that life was the light of men,
a light that shines in the dark,
a light that darkness could not overpower.

[A man came, sent by God.
His name was John.
He came as a witness,
as a witness to speak for the light,
so that everyone might believe through him.
He was not the light,
only a witness to speak for the light.]

The Word was the true light
that enlightens all men;
and he was coming into the world.
He was in the world
that had its being through him,
and the world did not know him.
He came to his own domain
and his own people did not accept him.
But to all who did accept him
he gave power to become children of God,
to all who believe in the name of him
who was born not out of human stock
or urge of the flesh
or will of man
but of God himself.

The Word was made flesh,
he lived among us, and we saw his glory,
the glory that is his as the only Son of the Father,
full of grace and truth.

[John appears as his witness. He proclaims:
'This is the one of whom I said:
He who comes after me
ranks before me
because he existed before me.'

Indeed, from this fullness we have, all of us, received—
yes, grace in return for grace,
since, though the Law was given through Moses,
grace and truth have come through Jesus Christ.
No one has ever seen God;
it is the only Son, who is nearest to the Father's heart,
who has made him known.]

[*Short Form: omit text in brackets.*]

Gospel

The first eighteen verses of John's gospel are usually referred to as the Prologue. The lectionary offers the option of reading the full text or a shorter version which omits the verses dealing with John the Baptist. It may be more effective to choose the shorter version on this day. It holds together as a coherent unit without the complexity of the additional references to the Baptist. On the other hand the shorter form omits the beautiful last three verses of the prologue.

The inspiration for this profound composition may have come from hymns to Wisdom in the Jewish tradition. For reasons that are not explained the author has shifted from the feminine figure of Wisdom to the masculine form of Word. The gospel of John does not have an infancy narrative like that of Matthew and Luke. Instead the author seeks to penetrate the meaning of this mystery that originates in the Godhead and culminates in the incarnation.

The prologue is a majestic meditation that calls for thoughtful proclamation – slow, deliberate, and above all, loving. Every phrase is to be savoured, most especially the climactic declaration: "The Word was made flesh, he lived among us, and we saw his glory".

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)