

SUNDAY READINGS

READ AT HOME

The Nativity of the Lord (Night)

Year B

25 December 2020



Collect

O God, who have made this most sacred night
radiant with the splendour of the true light,
grant, we pray, that we, who have known the mysteries of his light on earth,
may also delight in his gladness in heaven.

Who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, for ever and ever.

Amen.

Readings and Commentaries

The night Mass on Christmas Eve, whether at midnight or earlier, has a unique feel about it. The sense of expectation built up over the past four weeks is coming to a climax; anticipation has reached a crescendo.

The regular congregation is outnumbered by visitors. Whole families have joined the throng. The church or outdoor worship space may be well lit, but night has fallen and darkness surrounds the gathered community.

Along with the night of the Easter Vigil, this is a night like no other. It welcomes a light that has overcome the darkness. It entrusts that light to communities like this, assembled around the globe. They are to be bearers of this light that it may shine in the darkest recesses of the world and awaken hope in human hearts.

A reading from the prophet Isaiah

9:1–7

The people that walked in darkness
has seen a great light;
on those who live in a land of deep shadow
a light has shone.
You have made their gladness greater,
you have made their joy increase;
they rejoice in your presence,
as men rejoice at harvest time,
as men are happy when they are dividing the spoils.
For the yoke that was weighing on him,
the bar across his shoulders,
the rod of his oppressor,
these you break as on the day of Midian.
For all the footgear of battle,
every cloak rolled in blood,
is burnt and consumed by fire.
For there is a child born for us,
a son given to us and dominion is laid on his
shoulders;
and this is the name they give him:
Wonder-Counsellor, Mighty-God,
Eternal-Father, Prince-of-Peace.
Wide is his dominion in a peace that has no end,
for the throne of David and for his royal power,
which he establishes and makes secure
in justice and integrity.
From this time onwards and for ever,
the jealous love of the Lord of hosts will do this.

First Reading

The very first line of tonight's reading, well proclaimed, never fails to thrill. It captures our attention, stirs our hearts, and readies us for all that is to follow. It is the solemn and joyous pronouncement that we have been longing to hear. The passage as a whole may have begun as an oracle for the coronation of a king in ancient Israel; in the Christian tradition it is a revelation of the Son of God.

Readers need to take special care on this night to wait long enough for the congregation to settle before launching into the text. They should pause before announcing that the reading is from the prophet Isaiah and pause again before commencing the proclamation. Their whole aim is to ensure that the assembly is ready and eager to hear the good news that is about to be announced. The reading itself needs to be read in a manner that matches the solemnity of the occasion. This may mean with greater deliberation and volume than usual.

After the exultation of the first three verses, the central part of the text (beginning with "For the yoke . . .") may be read with slightly less emphasis. This will allow the reader to give full weight to the momentous declaration that follows: "For there is a child born for us, a son given to us . . .". This leads on to the majestic litany of names for this child-king: "Wonder-Counsellor, Mighty-God, Eternal Father, Prince-of-Peace". Each of these titles deserves to be given due emphasis.

The tension needs to be sustained through to the very end of the reading so that it is heard as a unified piece of good news.

Responsorial Psalm

Ps 95:1–3, 11–13

R. Today is born our Saviour, Christ the Lord.

○ sing a new song to the Lord,
sing to the Lord all the earth.

○ sing to the Lord, bless his name. **R.**

Proclaim his help day by day,
tell among the nations his glory
and his wonders among all the peoples. **R.**

Let the heavens rejoice and earth be glad,
let the sea and all within it thunder praise,
let the land and all it bears rejoice,
all the trees of the wood shout for joy
at the presence of the Lord for he comes,
he comes to rule the earth. **R.**

With justice he will rule the world,
he will judge the peoples with his truth. **R.**

Responsorial Psalm

The psalm from which these verses are taken is a hymn in praise of God who orders the earth and rules with justice.

The response with which the reader begins is a joyful declaration in the very same style as the first reading. It should be announced in a positive and confident tone so that all may hear and respond with conviction.

The verses maintain the spirit of joyful praise throughout. The reader needs to note that the verses are of different lengths – two with three lines, then one with six, and a final one with two. This presents a challenge. The task of the reader is to clearly indicate by tone of voice and visual cue exactly when the verse has come to an end and the congregation is called to respond.

**A reading from the letter of
St Paul to Titus**

2:11–14

God's grace has been revealed, and it has made salvation possible for the whole human race and taught us that what we have to do is to give up everything that does not lead to God, and all our worldly ambitions; we must be self-restrained and live good and religious lives here in this present world, while we are waiting in hope for the blessing which will come with the Appearing of the glory of our great God and saviour Christ Jesus. He sacrificed himself for us in order to set us free from all wickedness and to purify a people so that it could be his very own and would have no ambition except to do good.

**A reading from the holy Gospel
according to Luke**

2:1–14

Caesar Augustus issued a decree for a census of the whole world to be taken. This census – the first – took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria, and everyone went to his own town to be registered. So Joseph set out from the town of Nazareth in Galilee and travelled up to Judaea, to the town of David called Bethlehem, since he was of David's House and line, in order to be registered together with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. While they were there the time came for her to have her child, and she gave birth to a son, her first-born. She wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger because there was no room for them at the inn. In the countryside close by there were shepherds who lived in the fields and took it in turns to watch their flocks during the night. The angel of the Lord appeared to them and the glory of the Lord shone round them. They were terrified, but the angel said, 'Do not be afraid. Listen, I bring you news of great joy, a joy to be shared by the whole people. Today in the town of David a saviour has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord. And here is a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger.' And suddenly with the angel there was a great throng of the heavenly host, praising God and singing:

'Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and peace to men who enjoy his favour'.

Second Reading

After the exuberance of the first reading and the psalm, the second reading is strikingly different in tone. It counsels restraint and holiness of life. One could be forgiven for wondering whether this is a Lenten text that has lost its way and ended up at Christmas by mistake!

Whether the letter to Titus is actually by Paul himself or by a later disciple is open to debate. But there is no doubt that this extract is like much of Paul's writing in that it is made up of rather long sentences. The ideas build up on top of one another in a continuous flow. Even though the reading is short it presents quite a challenge to reader and listener alike.

It first requires careful preparation. The reader needs to take time to identify the central assertion and to be clear about how the whole sentence is constructed – about what is primary and what is secondary, what leads up to the main thought and what flows from it. If readers are clear in their own minds what the message is, and proclaim it accordingly, the congregation will be more likely to get the point. The reader has plenty of time to become familiar with the text but the community only gets one chance to listen.

In spite of its generally sober tone, there is much of Christmas joy in the reading. Christians are to live their lives well between two glorious events – the incarnation ("God's grace has been revealed") and the parousia ("the Appearing of the glory of our great God and saviour Christ Jesus"). It is these divine initiatives that make good living possible.

Gospel

We turn now to Luke for his account of Jesus' birth. What has become the popular story of Christmas – and what is represented in countless cribs – is largely derived from this. It has all the familiar features: the journey to Bethlehem, the manger, the swaddling clothes, the shepherds, the angel's message, and the angelic hymn "Glory to God in the highest heaven." Proclaimed during the night Mass it has unique appeal.

But what at one level appears to be a vivid and engaging first-hand report of the event is in fact a deeply theological construction. Luke has used all his literary skill to present the birth of Jesus as the bridge between past and future. The birth of the Saviour brings ancient promise to fulfilment and at the same time ushers in a new era of universal salvation. For this we gladly give thanks and praise tonight.

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)