

SUNDAY READINGS

READ AT HOME

The Nativity of the Lord (Vigil)

Year B

25 December 2020



Collect

O God, who gladden us year by year
as we wait in hope for our redemption,
grant that, just as we joyfully welcome
your Only Begotten Son as our Redeemer,
we may also merit to face him confidently
when he comes again as our Judge.
Who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, for ever and ever.

Amen.

Readings and Commentaries

The lectionary provides four complete sets of readings for the Christmas feast, each linked to the time Mass is being celebrated. One is for the Vigil, another for 'Mass During the Night', a third for 'Mass At Dawn', and the fourth for 'Mass During the Day'. In Australia many parishes have either two evening Masses on Christmas Eve or an evening Mass followed by Midnight Mass. Some may even have three Masses: two in the evening plus Midnight Mass. Since all of these are actual celebrations of Christmas, the readings for "Mass During the Night" may be used instead of those for the Vigil.

In recent years the Mass-going habits of many Catholics have changed. Instead of attending weekly or even monthly Sunday Mass, they come for the major festivals such as Easter and Christmas. Christmas above all is a time for children and families. This means that crowds are larger and less familiar with liturgical protocol. This may present a challenge, but more especially a wonderful pastoral opportunity. Warm hospitality will touch the hearts of those for whom Christmas and/or Easter is their only connection with church life.

A reading from the prophet Isaiah 62:1–5

About Zion I will not be silent,
about Jerusalem I will not grow weary,
until her integrity shines out like the dawn
and her salvation flames like a torch.
The nations then will see your integrity,
all the kings your glory,
and you will be called by a new name,
one which the mouth of the Lord will confer.
You are to be a crown of splendour in the hand of
the Lord,
a princely diadem in the hand of your God;
no longer are you to be named 'Forsaken',
nor your land 'Abandoned',
but you shall be called 'My Delight'
and your land 'The Wedded';
for the Lord takes delight in you
and your land will have its wedding.
Like a young man marrying a virgin,
so will the one who built you wed you,
and as the bridegroom rejoices in his bride,
so will your God rejoice in you.

First Reading

At their best, weddings are wonderful occasions of celebration. They bring families and friends together in a spirit of joy and love. Happy weddings can bring out the best in us: generosity, gratitude, goodwill. Genuine love calls forth more love. Of course not all weddings are delightful, far from it. But as an image of our hope for human fulfilment, a wedding feast is hard to beat.

It's no surprise therefore that ancient Israel often imagined its relationship with God in terms of marriage and a wedding feast. God loved the people of Israel as a husband loves his bride – with joy and pride. This is the tradition that the prophet Isaiah calls on to encourage those who have returned home from exile and are struggling to rebuild their city. He's inviting them to let their imaginations run free, to look beyond their toils and tribulations and see a vision of a glorious wedding. The language is extravagant, as is the language of lovers.

The reading takes the form of a poetic proclamation. It is a solemn but joyful announcement. Both qualities should be evident in the way the reading is delivered. The phrases are short and clear; each one should be given its due until it comes to its heart-warming conclusion: "as the bridegroom rejoices in his bride, so will your God rejoice over you". The reader of this text has the privilege of communicating the joy of Christmas to the gathered assembly as the festive celebration gets under way.

Responsorial Psalm Ps 88:4–5, 16–17, 27, 29

R. For ever I will sing the goodness of the Lord.

'I have made a covenant with my chosen one;
I have sworn to David my servant:
I will establish your dynasty for ever
and set up your throne through all ages.' **R.**

Happy the people who acclaim such a king,
who walk, O Lord, in the light of your face,
who find their joy every day in your name,
who make your justice the source of their bliss. **R.**

'He will say to me: "You are my father,
my God, the rock who saves me".
I will keep my love for him always;
for him my covenant shall endure.' **R.**

Responsorial Psalm

The response to the psalm immediately takes up and reinforces the spirit of the feast: "Forever I will sing the goodness of the Lord". It's a strong and positive declaration. It should be announced with such conviction that the whole assembly will want to make it their own.

The reader needs to take a close look at the three verses selected from different parts of this quite long psalm. The first and third verses are presented as God's words to us, while the second verse is in the form of our address to God. It will be a challenge for the reader to convey this change of speaker from verse to verse. It may be helpful to approach the alternation of voices as a dialogue of love between the divine lover and his beloved people.

A reading from the Acts of the Apostles

13:16–17, 22–25

When Paul reached Antioch in Pisidia, he stood up in the synagogue, held up a hand for silence and began to speak:

‘Men of Israel, and fearers of God, listen! The God of our nation Israel chose our ancestors, and made our people great when they were living as foreigners in Egypt; then by divine power he led them out.

‘Then he made David their king, of whom he approved in these words, “I have selected David son of Jesse, a man after my own heart, who will carry out my whole purpose”. To keep his promise, God has raised up for Israel one of David’s descendants, Jesus, as Saviour, whose coming was heralded by John when he proclaimed a baptism of repentance for the whole people of Israel. Before John ended his career he said, “I am not the one you imagine me to be; that one is coming after me and I am not fit to undo his sandal”.’

A reading from the holy Gospel according to Matthew

1:1–25

[A genealogy of Jesus Christ son of David, son of Abraham:

Abraham was the father of Isaac,

Isaac the father of Jacob,

Jacob was the father of Judah and his brothers,

Judah was the father of Perez and Zerah, Tamar being their mother,

Perez was the father of Hezron,

Hezron the father of Ram,

Ram was the father of Amminadab,

Amminadab was the father of Nahshon,

Nahshon the father of Salmon,

Salmon was the father of Boaz, Rahab being his mother,

Boaz was the father of Obed, Ruth being his mother,

Obed was the father of Jesse;

and Jesse was the father of King David.

Second Reading

The second reading is quite different in tone from the ecstatic poetry of the first. It may appear at first sight to be quite out of place in a Christmas celebration.

What we have is an extract from a long sermon delivered by Paul in the synagogue at Antioch in Pisidia. It is not an easy text to proclaim to a Christmas congregation, or indeed any congregation that is not familiar with the Bible, especially the Old Testament.

Paul is addressing a Jewish community for the first time. What he wants to do is persuade his hearers that Jesus is the fulfilment of God’s promises of old. To argue his case, he draws at length from what was well-known to his audience – their Jewish tradition and writings. This creates a double difficulty for tonight’s reader and congregation: the all-too-general ignorance of scripture among Catholics and the rhetorical style of Paul’s sermon.

The key point is that Jesus is Son of David and Saviour. This emerges out of Paul’s short summary of salvation history – God’s choosing a people, leading them out of Egypt to freedom, giving them David as king, and finally sending John the Baptist to herald the Messiah. As is often the case with Paul, his thoughts tumble out on top of one another and give rise to long and complex sentences. An effective proclamation of this text will depend on careful preparation. The reader needs to understand Paul’s line of thought and where to put the emphasis for the congregation to truly hear this as the word of God.

Gospel

Matthew tells the story of Jesus’ birth quite differently from Luke. He makes his intentions clear in the very first verse of his gospel: “An account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham” (NRSV).

Matthew declares his hand by naming David in advance of Abraham. Writing for a Jewish Christian community, he wants to establish the point that Jesus is descended from David. To do this he focuses on the person of Joseph rather than on Mary because it is Joseph who is of David’s line. According to the customs of a patriarchal society, Jesus himself thus becomes a “son of David”.

This in turn allows Matthew to adopt and adapt Isaiah’s prophecy to the “House of David” via Ahaz: “The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son and they will call him Emmanuel, a name

David was the father of Solomon, whose mother had been Uriah's wife,
Solomon was the father of Rehoboam,
Rehoboam was the father of Abijah,
Abijah was the father of Asa,
Asa was the father of Jehoshaphat,
Jehoshaphat was the father of Joram,
Joram was the father of Azariah,
Azariah was the father of Jotham,
Jotham was the father of Ahaz,
Ahaz the father of Hezekiah,
Hezekiah was the father of Manasseh,
Manasseh the father of Amon,
Amon the father of Josiah,
and Josiah was the father of Jechoniah and his brothers.
Then the deportation to Babylon took place.

After the deportation to Babylon:
Jechoniah was the father of Shealtiel,
Shealtiel the father of Zerubbabel,
Zerubbabel was the father of Abiud,
Abiud the father of Eliakim,
Eliakim the father of Azor,
Azor was the father of Zadok,
Zadok the father of Achim,
Achim the father of Eliud,
Eliud was the father of Eleazar,
Eleazar the father of Matthan,
Matthan the father of Jacob;
and Jacob was the father of Joseph the husband of Mary; of her was born Jesus who is called Christ.

The sum of generations is therefore : fourteen from Abraham to David; fourteen from David to the Babylonian deportation; and fourteen from the Babylonian deportation to Christ.]

This is how Jesus Christ came to be born. His mother Mary was betrothed to Joseph, but before they came to live together she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit. Her husband Joseph, being a man of honour and wanting to spare her publicity, decided to divorce her informally.

He had made up his mind to do this when the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, 'Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because she has conceived what is in her by the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son and you must name him Jesus, because he is the one who is to save his people from their sins.' Now all this took place to fulfil the words spoken by the Lord through the prophet:

The Virgin will conceive and give birth to a son
and they will call him Emmanuel,

a name which means 'God-is-with-us'. When Joseph woke up he did what the angel of the Lord told him to do: he took his wife to his home and, though he had not had intercourse with her, she gave birth to a son; and he named him Jesus.

[Short Form: omit text in brackets.]

which means 'God-is-with-us'. Thus Jesus the Christ, the Messiah, is son of David and Son of God.

Today's gospel comes in a longer and a shorter form, i.e. with or without the genealogy. Pastoral considerations would favour, if not dictate, using the shorter form.

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)