

# **SUNDAY READINGS**

## READ AT HOME

Third Sunday of Advent

Year C

12 December 2021



### **Collect**

O God, who see how your people  
faithfully await the feast of the Lord's Nativity,  
enable us, we pray,  
to attain the joys of so great a salvation  
and to celebrate them always  
with solemn worship and glad rejoicing.  
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**

Not every presider takes up the option of wearing rose-coloured vestments today. The lighter shade is meant to signal a gentler spirit in the celebration, harking back to a time when Advent was considered more penitential than it is now. The traditional name for the day, "Gaudete Sunday," comes from the Latin verb "to rejoice."

That's what Paul wanted his beloved community at Philippi to do. Even though he's writing to them from prison, he bids them: "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice" (4:4, NRSV). The prophet Zephaniah had an even more exuberant message for his people centuries before: "Shout for joy, daughter of Jerusalem, Israel, shout aloud!"

These are timely words, coming as they do in mid-December when we can be caught up in a frantic whirlwind of activities. If we're not engaged in end-of-year celebrations, we're busy preparing for Christmas and the summer holiday season. Today we're offered a circuit-breaker, an opportunity to be bathed in the joy that only God can bestow upon us.

### **A reading from the prophet Zephaniah 3:14–18**

Shout for joy, daughter of Zion,  
Israel, shout aloud!  
Rejoice, exult with all your heart,  
daughter of Jerusalem!  
The Lord has repealed your sentence;  
he has driven your enemies away.  
The Lord, the king of Israel, is in your midst;  
you have no more evil to fear.  
When that day comes, word will come to  
Jerusalem:  
Zion, have no fear,  
do not let your hands fall limp.  
The Lord your God is in your midst,  
a victorious warrior.  
He will exult with joy over you,  
he will renew you by his love;  
he will dance with shouts of joy for you  
as on a day of festival.

### **Responsorial Psalm**

#### **Isaiah 12:2–6**

**R.** Cry out with joy and gladness:  
for among you is the great and Holy One  
of Israel.

Truly, God is my salvation,  
I trust, I shall not fear.  
For the Lord is my strength, my song,  
he became my saviour.  
With joy you will draw water  
from the wells of salvation. **R.**

Give thanks to the Lord,  
give praise to his name!  
make his mighty deeds known to the peoples!  
Declare the greatness of his name. **R.**

Sing a psalm to the Lord  
for he has done glorious deeds,  
make them known to all the earth!  
People of Zion, sing and shout for joy  
for great in your midst is the Holy One of  
Israel. **R.**

### **First Reading**

The prophet Zephaniah seems to have been a contemporary of Jeremiah during the reign of Josiah, the reforming king of Judah, some six centuries before the birth of Christ. Zephaniah is much less well known and has left a much smaller legacy of writings (a book of three chapters compared with Jeremiah's fifty-two). The Sunday Lectionary contains only two short readings from him.

Today's passage is a jubilant chant of exultation from the book's conclusion. Standing in such complete contrast to the oracles of judgement and doom that precede it suggests that it was added by a later editor to offset Zephaniah's fierce denunciations of idolatry.

The reading that we have is a joyous canticle from start to finish, pulsing with exuberant energy. The few who have survived their enemies' attacks are bade to "shout," "rejoice" and "exult." And with good reason. Fresh from victory, the Lord their God is in their midst, dancing with shouts of joy for them.

Readers rarely have the opportunity to proclaim a text that bursts with such jubilation. They should let the assembly settle before launching into the dramatic opening command, "Shout for joy, daughter of Zion!" Then they need to sustain this heightened sense of festivity, delivering each verse at a measured pace and with positive conviction.

### **Responsorial Psalm**

The various categories into which the books of the Bible are placed – history, prophecy, wisdom, letters and so on – are somewhat arbitrary. Many defy these boundaries and contain elements of more than one form of literature. Some of the prophets, for example, contain passages that in effect are psalms. Today's responsorial psalm is one of these. It comes from the book of the prophet Isaiah.

It dovetails perfectly with the reading from Zephaniah. In fact the response – "Cry out with joy and gladness: for among you is the great and Holy One of Israel" – is a succinct summary of that reading. The verses in turn expand on that declaration. Most of the first verse is a personal confession of faith before the focus moves to the assembly and stays there until the end. The people are issued one happy command after another: "give thanks", "make known", "declare", "sing" and "shout".

Readers will note the shift in tone from the quiet trust of the first verse to the extroverted spirit of the remainder. They should modify their delivery accordingly, to enable the congregation to make the transition with them.

There are two further challenges. Firstly, the response is long, unfamiliar and in two parts. Readers should use a rising pitch for "gladness" and pause briefly before continuing. This will discourage the assembly from repeating the first part prematurely. It may be useful for readers to repeat the response with the assembly the first time. Secondly, each of the three verses is of different length. Readers will need to give clear verbal and visual cues to prompt the response at the right time.

### **A reading from the letter of St Paul to the Philippians**

**4:4–7**

I want you to be happy, always happy in the Lord; I repeat, what I want is your happiness. Let your tolerance be evident to everyone: the Lord is very near. There is no need to worry; but if there is anything you need, pray for it, asking God for it with prayer and thanksgiving, and that peace of God, which is so much greater than we can understand, will guard your hearts and your thoughts, in Christ Jesus.

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

**3:10–18**

When all the people asked John. ‘What must we do?’ he answered, ‘If anyone has two tunics he must share with the man who has none, and the one with something to eat must do the same.’ There were tax collectors too who came for baptism, and these said to him, ‘Master, what must we do?’ He said to them, ‘Exact no more than your rate.’ Some soldiers asked him in their turn, ‘What about us? What must we do?’ He said to them, ‘No intimidation! No extortion! Be content with your pay!’

A feeling of expectancy had grown among the people, who were beginning to think that John might be the Christ, so John declared before them all, ‘I baptise you with water, but someone is coming, someone who is more powerful than I am, and I am not fit to undo the strap of his sandals; he will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing-fan is in his hand to clear his threshing-floor and to gather the wheat into his barn; but the chaff he will burn in a fire that will never go out.’ As well as this, there were many other things he said to exhort the people and to announce the Good News to them.

### **Second Reading**

The second reading, again a short extract from Paul’s letter to the Philippians, maintains the upbeat spirit established by Zephaniah and Isaiah. Paul’s heartfelt good wishes for this community – that they be happy, tolerant, trusting, thankful and at peace – clearly spring from his own faith experience. His deep desire is for them to embrace life in Christ as fully as he has.

It’s worth noting that one phrase in the text points to the multiple meanings of the word “advent.” When Paul declares “The Lord is very near,” his words suggest both the end time when Christ will reappear in glory and the present time when he is with us in the power of the Spirit.

He writes as the community’s proud founder, teacher and mentor. His manifest intent is to encourage these believers who are still young in faith. If readers could imagine themselves to be Paul himself addressing the Philippians, they would deliver the reading with great sincerity of heart.

The first few sentences of the reading are short and straightforward, but they are followed by a long elaborate sentence which needs to be proclaimed with care. A moderate pace, timely pauses and a tone of voice that distinguishes between main and subordinate clauses are the order of the day.

### **Gospel**

Having introduced us to John the Baptist last Sunday, Luke now gives us a fuller picture of his prophetic ministry. John’s proclamation of a “baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins” draws a crowd of listeners who want to know what they must do.

The question is posed in turn by the general populace, tax collectors and soldiers. Notably absent from this selection are the religious authorities. Perhaps they have been stung by John’s use of the term “brood of vipers” in the verses preceding the reading. Luke is already signalling who will welcome the good news and who will not.

John’s replies are eminently fair. The people are called to care for the needy. Tax collectors and soldiers are told not to abuse their power. Essentially John is doing no more than bidding them observe the precepts of the Law, in contrast with the rigorous demands Jesus makes in the Sermon on the Mount.

But John goes on to herald the advent of the long-awaited Messiah who will usher in a new era of Spirit and fire. A new era it may be, but John still uses the traditional imagery of divine judgement to describe it. It will take time for Luke to spell out what the Baptist’s “good news” really means.

## Concluding Prayers

### Solemn Blessing for Advent

May the almighty and merciful God,  
by whose grace we have placed our faith  
in the First Coming of his Only Begotten Son  
and yearn for his coming again  
sanctify us by the radiance of Christ's Advent  
and enrich us with his blessing.

**Amen.**

As we run the race of this present life,  
may he make us firm in faith,  
joyful in hope and active in charity.

**Amen.**

So that, rejoicing now with devotion  
at the Redeemer's coming in the flesh,  
we may be endowed with the rich reward of eternal life  
when he comes again in majesty.

**Amen.**

And may the blessing of almighty God,  
the Father, and the Son, + and the Holy Spirit,  
come down on us and remain with us for ever.

**Amen.**

(Adapted from the Solemn Blessing for Advent, *The Roman Missal* p. 709)