

SUNDAY READINGS

READ AT HOME

Fourth Sunday of Advent

Year C

19 December 2021



Collect

Pour forth, we beseech you, O Lord,
your grace into our hearts,
that we, to whom the Incarnation of Christ your Son
was made known by the message of an Angel,
may by his Passion and Cross
be brought to the glory of his Resurrection.
Who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, for ever and ever.
Amen.

Readings and Commentaries

The courtyard of the Chapel of the Visitation at Ein Karem has two distinctive features. One is a modern sculpture of the two pregnant women, Mary and Elizabeth, greeting each other. The other is a wall with forty-two plaques displaying the words of the Magnificat in as many languages. The sculpture invites quiet contemplation of the women's intimate encounter, whereas Mary's canticle draws the visitor into the grand sweep of God's revolutionary engagement with our world.

These two perspectives, micro and macro, continue in play when we celebrate the birth of the Messiah. We devoutly contemplate the scene of the new-born child in the care of his devout parents. As we do so it dawns on us that this heart-warming tableau has cosmic significance: glory to God on high and on earth peace.

This is what incarnation reveals, that the earthy, everyday, ordinary things of life are the means by which the sublime mystery of divine goodness is made manifest. No matter how grand the liturgy, it's simple things like the telling of stories, partaking of bread and wine, pouring water, smearing oil and laying on hands that are charged with the grace of God.

A reading from the prophet Micah**5:1–4**

The Lord says this:

You, Bethlehem Ephrathah,
the least of the clans of Judah,
out of you will be born for me
the one who is to rule over Israel;
his origin goes back to the distant past,
to the days of old.

The Lord is therefore going to abandon them
till the time when she who is to give birth gives birth.
Then the remnant of his brothers will come back
to the sons of Israel.

He will stand and feed his flock
with the power of the Lord,
with the majesty of the name of his God.
They will live secure, for from then on he will extend
his power
to the ends of the land.
He himself will be peace.

First Reading

Micah is one of the dozen prophets rather unfortunately classified as “Minor.” His message certainly is not. Along with his 8th century contemporaries, Amos, Hosea and the “Major” prophet Isaiah, Micah railed against the unchecked exploitation, corruption and injustices plaguing Israel. Today one could say that Micah himself suffers injustice by being included in the Sunday Lectionary only this once. Even his brilliant summary of the Torah, “to act justly, to love tenderly and to walk humbly with your God” (6:8), is never heard by the Sunday assembly. Micah leavens his prosecution of Israel’s leaders with oracles of hope. Today’s reading is one of these. It promises the birth of a new ruler who will bring Israel’s time of abandonment and dispersion to an end. In God’s name he will establish a reign of peace and will care for the people like a shepherd.

Matthew draws on this passage in his account of Jesus’ birth. When the wise men come to Jerusalem in search of the “king of the Jews,” Herod is disturbed and consults the chief priests and scribes. In their advice they cite today’s text to confirm that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem, with tragic consequences for its innocent children.

In addition to getting the pronunciation of the awkward “Bethlehem Ephrathah” right, readers will need to rehearse the first long and enigmatic sentence carefully. It is set out in short units which should not be hurried through or strung together; each should be given its own time and weight.

Responsorial Psalm Ps 79:2–3, 15–16, 18–19

R. Lord, make us turn to you;
let us see your face and we shall be saved.

○ shepherd of Israel, hear us,
shine forth from your cherubim throne.
○ Lord, rouse up your might,
○ Lord, come to our help. R.

God of hosts, turn again, we implore,
look down from heaven and see.
Visit this vine and protect it,
the vine your right hand has planted. R.

May your hand be on the man you have chosen,
the man you have given your strength.
And we shall never forsake you again:
give us life that we may call upon your name. R.

Responsorial Psalm

For the third Sunday in a row, readers have a two-part response to announce. As has been noted before, this requires an inflection at the end of the first part to indicate there is more to come, then a pause before the second part is proclaimed. This will convey to the assembly that the response is not to be rushed through but prayed as two complementary petitions forming an organic whole.

The response serves as a three-fold refrain in the psalm itself, Psalm 79/80, a communal lament after a defeat. The people pray for God’s vineyard, Israel, to be rebuilt and replanted.

The three verses selected for the responsorial psalm are variants of the one plea for divine assistance. The first appeals to God as Israel’s mighty shepherd, the protector who has established covenant with them (hinted at by mention of the “cherubim throne” of the ark of the covenant). The second uses the familiar agricultural image of the owner caring for his vineyard, and the third asks for a blessing on God’s human agent, the king, before finishing with a promise. Together the verses and response arise from the people’s realisation that they are lost without God’s help. But implicit in their cry is a confidence based on past experience that God can be relied upon to hear them. The reader’s task is to enable the assembly to sense this confidence that gives substance to Israel’s pleading.

A reading from the letter to the Hebrews

10:5–10

This is what Christ said, on coming into the world:

You who wanted no sacrifice or oblation,
prepared a body for me.
You took no pleasure in holocausts
or sacrifices for sin;
then I said,
just as I was commanded
in the scroll of the book,
'God, here I am!
I am coming to obey your will.'

Notice that he says first:

You did not want what the Law lays
down as the things to be offered, that is:
the sacrifices, the oblations, the holocausts
and the sacrifices for sin,
and you took no pleasure in them;
and then he says: Here I am!
I am coming to obey your will. He is abolishing
the first sort to replace it with the second. And this
will was for us to be made holy by the offering of
his body made once and for all by Jesus Christ.

A reading from the holy Gospel according to Luke

1:39–44

Mary set out and went as quickly as she could to
a town in the hill country of Judah. She went into
Zechariah's house and greeted Elizabeth. Now as
soon as Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child
leapt in her womb and Elizabeth was filled with
the Holy Spirit. She gave a loud cry and said, 'Of
all women you are the most blessed, and blessed
is the fruit of your womb. Why should I be
honoured with a visit from the mother of my Lord?
For the moment your greeting reached my ears,
the child in my womb leapt for joy. Yes, blessed is
she who believed that the promise made her by
the Lord would be fulfilled.'

Second Reading

A first glance at the reading from Hebrews might
bring Holy Week to mind rather than Advent. The
references to sacrifice, obedience to God's will and
the offering of a body all allude to the passion and
death of Jesus. But Christmas and Easter are two sides
of the one coin. The birth of the Christ child will
culminate in his saving death on the cross.

This short extract is enough to show that the unknown
author is like a debater mounting a case. Taking the
letter as a whole, he wants to persuade his readers,
who seem to be losing faith, of the superiority and
eternal efficacy of Christ's self-sacrifice. Jesus' death
on the cross has secured for believers permanent
access to the realm of God.

The author's familiarity with Jewish scripture and his
sermon-like style are evident in this passage. He cites
part of Psalm 39/40 which, like other psalms and the
prophets, asserts that putting God's will into practice
takes primacy over the sacrificial system. Mercy and
justice are what matter, as Jesus declares.

This passage will not be at all easy for the assembly
to follow. It launches them without warning into the
latter part of a long argument delivered in elevated
rhetoric. Readers need to note carefully how the text
unfolds. First there is the quotation from the psalm,
then its repetition in two parts, before two conclusions
are drawn. The reader's aim will be to give the
congregation its best chance of following the
argumentation. This will take study and practice.

Gospel

With great skill Luke weaves together a story with
human appeal and theological purpose. What could
be more heart-warming than the sight of two
surprisingly pregnant women – one young and
betrothed, the other older and childless – greeting and
blessing each other?

Having captured our attention so sympathetically, Luke
wants us to join Elizabeth in her confession of faith.
The ancient hopes of God's people are being fulfilled
in an unimaginably new way. And it is all the work of
the Holy Spirit. The prophet who will herald the
messianic mission of Jesus, John the Baptist, pays
homage even from the womb. Countless believers
have made this witness of mother and son, Elizabeth
and John, their own every time they have prayed the
prayer that enshrines her words, the Hail Mary.

Along with the enigmatic prophecy of Micah, this
lovely story sets the stage for our celebration of the
Saviour's birth, even as the reading from Hebrews
alerts us to its paschal implications.

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)