

SUNDAY READINGS

READ AT HOME

Second Sunday of Advent

Year C

5 December 2021



Collect

Almighty and merciful God,
may no earthly undertaking hinder those
who set out in haste to meet your Son,
but may our learning of heavenly wisdom
gain us admittance to his company.
Who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, for ever and ever.
Amen.

Readings and Commentaries

Luke is at pains to situate the story of Jesus within the geo-political order of his day. His roll call of the powers-that-be, both near and far, makes it clear how unfavourable the circumstances were for a lone Galilean Jew to sow seeds of global transformation. Yet that's what he did.

Our hearing of the good news is conditioned by world order of our time. That means, for example, that we cannot hear Baruch's exuberant account of the exiles' home-coming without thinking of the tens of millions of people languishing in refugee camps around the world. We wish they could enjoy such a jubilant return home.

We hear Paul's upbeat prayer for his beloved Philippians at a time when our own Church communities are aging, diminishing and struggling with the shame of sexual abuse. Dare we let our faith be rekindled by his fervent conviction?

Those calling for a new Church and a new human order may feel that, like the Baptist, they are voices crying in the wilderness. Yet cry they do against all the odds, as must we. The season of Advent gives us fresh heart. It's a graced time for the powerful renewal of our hope and faith.

A reading from the prophet Baruch 5:1–9

Jerusalem, take off your dress of sorrow and distress,
put on the beauty of the glory of God for ever,
wrap the cloak of the integrity of God around you,
put the diadem of the glory of the Eternal on your
head:
since God means to show your splendour to every nation
under heaven,
since the name God gives you for ever will be,
'Peace through integrity, and honour through
devotedness'.
Arise, Jerusalem, stand on the heights
and turn your eyes to the east:
see your sons reassembled from west and east
at the command of the Holy One,
jubilant that God has remembered them.
Though they left you on foot,
with enemies for an escort,
now God brings them back to you
like royal princes carried back in glory.
For God has decreed the flattening
of each high mountain, of the everlasting hills,
the filling of the valleys to make the ground level
so that Israel can walk in safety under the glory of
God.
And the forests and every fragrant tree will
provide shade for Israel at the command of God;
for God will guide Israel in joy by the light of his glory
with his mercy and integrity for escort.

Responsorial Psalm

Ps 125

R. The Lord has done great things for us;
we are filled with joy.

When the Lord delivered Zion from bondage,
it seemed like a dream.
Then was our mouth filled with laughter,
on our lips there were songs. **R.**

The heathens themselves said:
'What marvels the Lord worked for them!'
What marvels the Lord worked for us!
Indeed we were glad. **R.**

Deliver us, O Lord, from our bondage
as streams in dry land.
Those who are sowing in tears
will sing when they reap. **R.**

They go out, they go out, full of tears
carrying seed for the sowing:
they come back, they come back, full of song,
carrying their sheaves. **R.**

First Reading

The reading from Baruch is a joyous oracle addressed to the city of Jerusalem. Pulsing with energy and enthusiasm, it ignites a blaze of hope in the heart of the city, cast as a forlorn mother lamenting the loss of her exiled children. To a people whose fortunes were at a desperately low ebb, it offers a succession of stirring images. Even now, when the Church is weak and wounded, this prophetic poem has the power to arouse hope in our own hearts.

The book which bears his name is in the form of a letter sent by Baruch, secretary to Jeremiah, from Babylon to Jerusalem, at the time of the exile. Today's reading is the whole of the fifth and final chapter. It begins with the striking command to Jerusalem to shed her garments of grief and don the garb of glory. This first section is radiant with beauty and should be proclaimed joyfully as a decree of celebration.

The remainder of the reading depicts Jerusalem as a sentinel on the look-out for returning exiles. Their reversal of fortune is dramatic. Their home-coming is a triumphant procession on a highway laid out by God's command. This whole section, which Baruch borrows from the prophet Isaiah, is an authoritative declaration of divine power and should be proclaimed as such. Readers might well pause before giving special emphasis to the flattening of mountains and the filling in of valleys to cue the assembly in to what they will hear in the gospel.

Responsorial Psalm

The psalms continue to serve as cherished prayers for every generation. Varying greatly in form, mood and length, they reflect the whole gamut of human experience. One group of short psalms is known as the Songs of Ascent. Devout pilgrims prayed them on their way up to the city of Jerusalem and the Temple.

One of them, Psalm 125/126, is prayed in full today. The response, adapted from the psalm, forges a link between past and present. Remembering the "great things" the Lord has done prompts a new outpouring of joy. Because the response falls into two parts, the reader will need to announce it with care to make sure the congregation hears it in full before beginning to recite it themselves.

The verses echo the reading from Baruch. God's people remember the joy of home-coming from exile. They laughed and sang so much that other peoples were moved to admiration. But some new distress makes them "go out, full of tears." Remembering God's past saving action renews their confidence that what they sow in tears will become a harvest reaped in joy.

The reader's task is to enable the assembly to join the pilgrims in their journey from great gladness (the first two verses) through desolation and to renewed joy (via the bitter-sweetness of the last two verses). This calls for sensitivity to the shifting emotional tone of the psalm.

**A reading from the letter of St Paul
to the Philippians 1:4–6, 8–11**

Every time I pray for all of you, I pray with joy, remembering how you have helped to spread the Good News from the day you first heard it right up to the present. I am quite certain that the One who began this good work in you will see that it is finished when the Day of Christ Jesus comes. God knows how much I miss you all, loving you as Christ Jesus loves you. My prayer is that your love for each other may increase more and more and never stop improving your knowledge and deepening your perception so that you can always recognise what is best. This will help you to become pure and blameless, and prepare you for the Day of Christ, when you will reach the perfect goodness which Jesus Christ produces in us for the glory and praise of God.

**A reading from the Gospel
according to Luke 3:1–6**

In the fifteenth year of Tiberius Caesar's reign, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judaea, Herod tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of the lands of Ituraea and Trachonitis, Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene, during the pontificate of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah, in the wilderness. He went through the whole Jordan district proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, as it is written in the book of the sayings of the prophet Isaiah:

A voice cries in the wilderness:
Prepare a way for the Lord,
make his paths straight.
Every valley will be filled in,
every mountain and hill be laid low,
winding ways will be straightened
and rough roads made smooth.
And all mankind shall see the salvation of God.

Second Reading

A good habit for readers to have is locating the Lectionary reading in the Bible. Seeing it in its original context sheds light on how it should be proclaimed. This exercise reveals, for example, that today's reading follows on from Paul's initial greeting to the community at Philippi. It will also show that a key verse (v. 7) referring to Paul's imprisonment has been omitted. It's a pity that these critical clues have been excluded.

Given Paul's incarceration, and the fact that he has problems to address in the community such as disunity and false teaching, this letter is remarkably sunny-spirited. Variations on the word "joy" occur sixteen times. We are left in no doubt about Paul's warm affection for the Philippians and his gratitude for their financial support.

He opens his heart and discloses his deeply felt and prayerful love for them. The reading is a happy marriage of Paul's profound faith in the good news and his devotion to the community. Readers should ponder and pray through this text to make the warmth of its spirit their own. They need to rehearse the whole passage, especially the longer sentences so typical of Paul's writing.

It should be proclaimed with great sincerity and at a moderately slow pace. This will enable the assembly to feel Paul's prayer is for them and could be their prayer for one another.

Gospel

Advent is a season of patient waiting. While we wait for the story of Jesus' birth, Luke takes us some decades ahead to the preaching of John the Baptist. He prefaces this with an introduction that embeds his gospel in time and place. Having promised at the outset to write "an orderly account of the events that have been fulfilled among us" (1:3), he now claims historical credence for his narrative by naming contemporary imperial and religious authorities.

Into this world of ceaseless power-broking the word of God is spoken. Luke's mundane roll-call of office-holders is suddenly shot through with surprise. A lone voice in the wilderness of Judaea speaks out, signalling the start of what would become a global revolution. The marvel of this unexpected turn of events will be conveyed to the assembly if the reader names each of Luke's movers and shakers in turn with unrushed deliberation, before proclaiming the dramatic main clause with conviction. This leads into a spirited rendition of the Baptist's proclamation.

Ironically John's use of Isaiah's oracle (cited also by Baruch) conjures up images of the progress of a conquering tyrant, for whose return in triumph every obstacle must be removed. Jesus' path, by contrast, grew narrower, harder and ever more lonely until it became a way of the cross.

But for now we let our hearts thrill with the promise of salvation for all. As Simeon proclaimed on seeing the child Jesus, here was "a light to enlighten the pagans and the glory of your people Israel" (2:29-32).

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)