

SUNDAY READINGS

READ AT HOME

Third Sunday of Advent

Year A

11 December 2022



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

The messianic era portrayed by the prophets promised wholesale healing. The land would be restored to fruitfulness, human beings would be made whole in body, mind and spirit, and the nation would enjoy peace, justice and prosperity. When questioned by the Baptist's disciples, Jesus lays out his messianic credentials in terms of bodily healing and the proclamation of good news.

In our time the idealisation of bodily integrity is being questioned by people who live with a disability. They challenge the common perception of them as being unfortunate or disadvantaged. They are determined to call out the false judgements people make of them. They want to be seen, accepted and treated as full human beings.

This wholesale change of attitude would be a powerful sign of grace. The realm of God is not the domain of the perfect but of the real. This is the larger testimony that Jesus' ministry offers. It was not the perfect that he came to call, but those who owned their flaws.

A reading from the prophet Isaiah 35:1–6, 10

Let the wilderness and the dry-lands exult,
let the wasteland rejoice and bloom,
let it bring forth flowers like the jonquil,
let it rejoice and sing for joy.

The glory of Lebanon is bestowed on it,
the splendour of Carmel and Sharon;
they shall see the glory of the Lord,
the splendour of our God.

Strengthen all weary hands,
steady all trembling knees
and say to all faint hearts,
'Courage! Do not be afraid.

'Look your God is coming,
vengeance is coming,
the retribution of God;
he is coming to save you.'

Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened,
the ears of the deaf unsealed,
then the lame shall leap like a deer
and the tongues of the dumb sing for joy,
for those the Lord has ransomed shall return.

They will come to Zion shouting for joy,
everlasting joy on their faces;
joy and gladness will go with them
and sorrow and lament be ended.

Responsorial Psalm

Ps 145:6–10

R. Lord, come and save us.

or

R. Alleluia!

It is the Lord who keeps faith for ever,
who is just to those who are oppressed.
It is he who gives bread to the hungry,
the Lord, who sets prisoners free. **R.**

It is the Lord who gives sight to the blind,
who raises up those who are bowed down,
the Lord, who protects the stranger
and upholds the widow and orphan. **R.**

It is the Lord who loves the just
but thwarts the path of the wicked.
The Lord will reign for ever,
Zion's God, from age to age. **R.**

First Reading

After the darkness of the night, the dawn of day lights up the world. That's the image suggested by today's reading from the prophet Isaiah. His joyous evocation of a transformed world is intended to dispel the shame and despair of the Israelites deported to Babylon. The dark years of exile are over. A new era has begun. The wilderness becomes a garden. Divine glory is revealed. Sin is forgiven. Physical and spiritual handicaps are healed. Exile ends in home-coming.

This is a festive litany, a sustained outburst of joy. It appeals to all our hopes for a new heaven and a new earth, for new hearts and a new humanity. It will make most sense to those who understand its background, but even those who aren't familiar with the story of the exile can't fail to be stirred by this poem's spirit. Readers might wish they could put the reading in biblical context and even connect it to contemporary experiences of exile, loss, separation and despair, but that is not their mandate.

Their task is to proclaim the text to the best of their ability, which in this case should be a joy. Having noted that the reading is in the form of a poem, they will deliver it with heightened emphasis and at a pace that gives the assembly time to savour its heart-warming images. Readers who allow themselves to be captivated by its jubilant spirit will serve their hearers well.

Responsorial Psalm

In the first reading, the prophet Isaiah promised the people that God was coming to save them. This promise has been adopted as the response to the psalm but adapted to become the petition "Lord, come and save us".

Psalm 145/146 is the first of the five psalms, all hymns of praise, that conclude the Book of Psalms. Each one begins and ends with the exclamation "Praise the Lord!" and are known as the Hallel psalms. It's the second half of the psalm that serves as the responsorial psalm today. In contrast with last Sunday's psalm which exalted the king, the earlier verses of Psalm 145/146 carry a warning not to put one's trust in mortal princes. This may reflect the exiles' disillusionment with the monarchy.

Instead, the psalmist encourages trusting the Lord alone. Each of the three stanzas begins with the phrase "It is the Lord". It is the Lord (alone) who is faithful, just, compassionate, caring and protective. While there is only one explicit parallel between them – sight for the blind – the psalmist's list of the Lord's trustworthy attributes is in complete harmony with the promises of Isaiah's oracle.

Given the brevity of the response, readers need to model it for the assembly. They should pause for a moment after the opening "Lord" before proceeding to the petition "come and save us". Otherwise, there's a risk of the response being rushed through. The verses present no difficulty; on the contrary they give the reader the opportunity to pray them with confident faith.

A reading from the letter of St James 5:7–10

Be patient, brothers, until the Lord's coming. Think of a farmer: how patiently he waits for the precious fruit of the ground until it has had the autumn rains and the spring rains! You too have to be patient; do not lose heart, because the Lord's coming will be soon. Do not make complaints against one another, brothers, so as not to be brought to judgement yourselves; the Judge is already to be seen waiting at the gates. For your example, brothers, in submitting with patience, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord.

A reading from the holy Gospel according to Matthew 11:2–11

John in his prison had heard what Christ was doing and he sent his disciples to ask him, 'Are you the one who is to come, or have we got to wait for someone else?' Jesus answered, 'Go back and tell John what you hear and see; the blind see again, and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised to life and the Good News is proclaimed to the poor; and happy is the man who does not lose faith in me.'

As the messengers were leaving, Jesus began to talk to the people about John: 'What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed swaying in the breeze? No? Then what did you go out to see? A man wearing fine clothes? Oh no, those who wear fine clothes are to be found in palaces. Then what did you go out for? To see a prophet? Yes, I tell you, and much more than a prophet: he is the one of whom scripture says: Look, I am going to send my messenger before you; he will prepare your way before you. I tell you solemnly, of all the children born of women, a greater than John the Baptist has never been seen; yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he is.'

Second Reading

This short passage from the letter of James maintains the focus on the parousia, the Lord's coming to bring salvation to completion. It is to be awaited with patience. Like Jesus in the synoptic gospels, James appeals to the everyday experience of communities on the land. He offers a simple image with a simple message. Just as farmers must wait for rain with patience, so must believers wait for the Lord's coming.

James goes on to warn the members of the community against making complaints about one another. This admonition too is set against the backdrop of the Lord's coming: "the Judge is already to be seen waiting at the gates". In the final sentence of the reading, James invokes the example of the prophets who suffered with patience.

A striking feature of the letter of James is the scarcity of references to Jesus Christ. Apart from the greeting in the opening verse, Christ is only mentioned in one other place (2:1). This leaves the identity of "the Lord" unclear. Does James intend to mean Christ or God? That aside, the reading is in James' typically plain-spoken style. Overall it is a message of encouragement and should be proclaimed as such. Readers may wish to note that the NRSV renders "brothers" as "beloved".

Gospel

The outspoken Baptist who called the Pharisees and Sadducees a "brood of vipers" and who (as we learn later) dares to confront Herod about his illicit marriage now appears as a doubly shadowy figure. First, he has faded from public view. Imprisoned and silenced, he is dependent on his disciples. Second, what he has heard about Jesus has infected him with doubt. The one whom he had announced as "more powerful than I am" hadn't instigated, as he had foreshadowed, "the retribution that is coming".

He is perplexed. Jesus was not the kind of messiah he was expecting. In reply Jesus draws on prophets like Isaiah to show that his works and words do fulfil the promises of the messianic era. In effect he implies that the Baptist had allowed himself to be held captive by too narrow and apocalyptic a view. Nonetheless he goes on to praise John as not just a prophet, but his herald, and indeed (in a later verse) as the long-expected Elijah.

For all his greatness, however, he belongs to a past dispensation, for the "least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he is". This is a bitter-sweet episode. It both exalts and humbles the Baptist and leaves him in Herod's hands. At the same time it validates Jesus' identity as the promised messiah, and it challenges the baptised to realise their dignity as members of the kingdom of God.

Like last Sunday's gospel, this passage is charged with energy and interest. Well proclaimed, it should hold the assembly's attention from start to finish.

Concluding Prayer

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)