

# SUNDAY READINGS

## READ AT HOME

Fourth Sunday of Advent

Year A

18 December 2022



### 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

On 8 December 1870, Pope Pius IX named St Joseph patron of the world-wide Church. One hundred and fifty years later, Pope Francis issued an apostolic letter to mark the anniversary. In it he reflected on Joseph as a father from seven points of view: a father who was beloved, tender and loving, obedient, accepting, creatively courageous, working, and in the shadows. Here is one brief extract on Joseph's creative courage.

"A superficial reading of these stories [the infancy narratives] can often give the impression that the world is at the mercy of the strong and mighty, but the 'good news' of the Gospel consists in showing that, for all the arrogance and violence of worldly powers, God always finds a way to carry out his saving plan. So too, our lives may at times seem to be at the mercy of the powerful, but the Gospel shows us what counts. God always finds a way to save us, provided we show the same creative courage as the carpenter of Nazareth, who was able to turn a problem into a possibility by trusting always in divine providence.

"If at times God seems not to help us, surely this does not mean that we have been abandoned, but instead are being trusted to plan, to be creative, and to find solutions ourselves".

## A reading from the prophet Isaiah 7:10–14

The Lord spoke to Ahaz and said, 'Ask the Lord your God for a sign for yourself coming either from the depths of Sheol or from the heights above.' 'No,' Ahaz answered 'I will not put the Lord to the test.'

Then Isaiah said:

'Listen now, House of David:  
are you not satisfied with trying the patience of men  
without trying the patience of my God, too?  
The Lord himself, therefore,  
will give you a sign.  
It is this: the maiden is with child  
and will soon give birth to a son  
whom she will call Emmanuel,  
a name which means "God-is-with-us".'

## First Reading

One verse of today's reading from the prophet Isaiah will be familiar because Matthew cites it in his account of Jesus' birth: "The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son and they will call him Emmanuel" (2:23). Few, however, may be aware of either the original context of this saying or the controversies about its interpretation.

Ahaz became king of Judah in the middle of the 8th century before Christ. Isaiah's testy encounter with him took place as the kingdom faced a crisis of survival in the face of regional power-plays. Long before that, the prophet Nathan had conveyed God's promise of enduring sovereignty to David and his descendants (1 Samuel 7:16). Isaiah chides Ahaz for not putting his faith in this divine pledge.

The historical meaning of the sign Ahaz is given is obscure. It is unclear who is signified by the pregnant woman and whether she was simply a young woman or more specifically a virgin. Following Matthew, Catholic tradition has identified her as the virgin Mary.

Readers therefore have a text to proclaim whose meaning may not become clear to the assembly until the very last verse. This presents them with the challenge of engaging everyone's attention right from the start and drawing them into the drama until it is resolved. The reading is short, but the back and forth of the dialogue invests it with energy. That's what readers need to take advantage of.

## Responsorial Psalm

Ps 23:1–6

**R.** Let the Lord enter;  
he is king of glory.

The Lord's is the earth and its fullness,  
the world and all its peoples.  
It is he who set it on the seas;  
on the waters he made it firm. **R.**

Who shall climb the mountain of the Lord?  
Who shall stand in his holy place?  
The man with clean hands and pure heart,  
who desires not worthless things. **R.**

He shall receive blessings from the Lord  
and reward from the God who saves him.  
Such are the men who seek him,  
seek the face of the God of Jacob. **R.**

## Responsorial Psalm

Normally it's clear how the responsorial psalm amplifies or complements the first reading. Today the connection is not so obvious. Psalm 23/24 as a whole falls into three parts. It opens with praise of the Creator, proceeds to lay down moral conditions for entering the sanctuary, and then celebrates the entry of the ark into the temple. It's the first two parts that comprise the responsorial psalm.

The way King Ahaz is depicted in the scriptures is at odds with the psalm's requirement for "clean hands and a pure heart". The link with Isaiah's oracle is not Ahaz, therefore, but the affirmation of both prophecy and psalm that "God-is-with-us". Together, the ark of the covenant and the royal dynasty serve as signs of the divine presence. All this may remind Christian worshippers of Jesus' presentation in the temple.

The response, taken from the third part of the psalm, is an emphatic summons to worship, combining a command – "Let the Lord enter" – with a confession of praise – "he is king of glory". It should be announced with strength and conviction. Each of the three verses of the psalm has a distinct character. The first is a profession of faith, the second a kind of examination of conscience, and the third a blend of both. Thoughtful readers will vary their delivery accordingly. The NRSV lectionary uses a different and inclusive translation.

**A reading from the letter of St Paul  
to the Romans**

**1:1–7**

From Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus who has been called to be an apostle, and specially chosen to preach the Good News that God promised long ago through his prophets in the scriptures.

This news is about the Son of God, who, according to the human nature he took, was a descendant of David: it is about Jesus Christ our Lord who, in the order of the spirit, the spirit of holiness that was in him, was proclaimed Son of God in all his power through his resurrection from the dead. Through him we received grace and our apostolic mission to preach the obedience of faith to all pagan nations in honour of his name. You are one of these nations, and by his call belong to Jesus Christ. To you all, then, who are God's beloved in Rome, called to be saints, may God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ send grace and peace.

**A reading from the holy Gospel  
according to Matthew**

**1:18–24**

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 had told him to do: he took his wife to his home.

**Second Reading**

Only once – on this Fourth Sunday of Advent in Year A – in the entire three-year cycle of readings for Sundays and feast days do we hear the formal opening of Paul's magisterial letter to the Christians of Rome. It is a dense text. The address begins with Paul's self-introduction and finishes with a greeting to the letter's recipients. These two items frame a concentrated resumé of the thesis that Paul will expand on in the course of a full sixteen chapters.

Key words are introduced here, such as God, Christ, faith, grace, holiness, pagans and saints. Conscious that he is writing to a Christian community of mixed origins, Paul skilfully establishes common ground between Jewish and Gentile believers. As both "a descendant of David" and "Son of God," Jesus is good news for all. Notably, the reference to David forges an explicit link with the first reading and the gospel.

The formality and density of this text make it a challenge for reader and listeners alike. It's clear that readers will need to prepare it well by reading and re-reading for themselves, analysing its contents and structure, and rehearsing its delivery out loud. A useful exercise would be to write out the whole passage, dividing it into short units to distinguish between its core assertions and their elaboration. It's also worth comparing the JB and the NRSV translations to see how each one breaks up the long paragraph. Readers who proclaim this text well will have the satisfaction of introducing the congregation to key Pauline teaching.

**Gospel**

Matthew's concern to establish Jesus' Davidic credentials is signalled in the very first verse of the gospel, when he names David ahead of Abraham before launching into the genealogy. This concern is a governing factor in Matthew's account of Jesus' birth. It is Joseph's lineage that makes Jesus a son of David in fulfilment of Isaiah's prophetic oracle. Matthew puts Joseph centre-stage in the human story of Jesus' birth.

He is careful to assert that Joseph's intention to release Mary from their betrothal sprang from motives of honour and respect, but this should not encourage modern readers to over-psychologise the episode. Matthew is telling the story theologically. The primary agent in the birth of Jesus is not Joseph but God, whether named as the Holy Spirit or as the angel of the Lord. That is why the one who is born is indeed "Emmanuel, God-with-us".

While Luke's infancy narrative has taken greater hold of the Christian imagination, Matthew's is still familiar. Those who bring fresh energy and lively faith to the proclamation of this text will succeed in engaging the assembly in the divine-human interplay of its characters.

## 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)