

SUNDAY READINGS

READ AT HOME

The Nativity of the Lord (Day)

Year A

25 December 2022



Collect

O God, who wonderfully created the dignity of human nature
and still more wonderfully restored it,
grant, we pray,
that we may share in the divinity of Christ,
who humbled himself to share in our humanity.
Who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, for ever and ever.

Amen.

Readings and Commentaries

By the time the community gathers for Mass for “During the Day,” the summer sun has fully risen. What the prophet Isaiah dramatically declared in the dark of night – “on those who live in a land of deep shadow a light has shone” – is now reflected in the elements. If there’s an enchanting air about Mass During the Night, the Daytime Mass invites us to wake from our dreaming and open our eyes to the full blaze of Christ’s glory.

Those who make their way to church on Christmas Day are likely to be a diverse lot, ranging from the devout who may already have attended a Vigil or Midnight Mass through regular parishioners who find this time suits them best and on to the once-or-twice-a-year worshippers who still sense the importance of this day. Many may be on their way to festive meals with family and friends. They will find themselves served rich fare at the table of the word. It’s a wonderful opportunity to treat them to a thoroughly well-proclaimed set of inspiring texts.

Isaiah thrills us with his jubilant announcement of good news for Zion, his high spirits being echoed throughout the responsorial psalm. The author of the letter to the Hebrews launches his magnificent homily on Christ’s priesthood and sacrifice with bold testimony to him as Son of God. And all this culminates in the glorious and profound opening chapter of John’s gospel. As the gospel acclamation declares, “Today a great light has come upon the earth.”

A reading from the prophet Isaiah**52:7–10**

How beautiful on the mountains,
are the feet of one who brings good news,
who heralds peace, brings happiness,
proclaims salvation,
and tells Zion,
'Your God is king!'

Listen! Your watchmen raise their voices,
they shout for joy together,
for they see the Lord face to face,
as he returns to Zion.

Break into shouts of joy together,
you ruins of Jerusalem;
for the Lord is consoling his people,
redeeming Jerusalem.

The Lord bares his holy arm
in the sight of all the nations,
and all the ends of the earth shall see
the salvation of our God.

First Reading

Right from the start Isaiah jolts us out of our mundane mindset. How beautiful, he claims, are feet! Not just any feet, of course, but those of the bearer of good news. The prophet wants us to imagine ourselves joining the sentries posted to watch out for such a messenger. We have to let ourselves be transported back to ancient times when news was conveyed from place to place in person. Sentinels were posted on hilltops and city walls to keep a keen eye out for the bringer of news.

How welcome the herald is on arrival and how much joy there is when he brings good news to a discouraged and disheartened community. Such were the exiles struggling to rebuild the ruined city to which they had returned. They were losing faith in God's covenant love. Isaiah's messenger announces the sure promise of God's return, bringing peace, happiness and salvation. It's good news not just for Jerusalem but for the whole world.

The striking exclamation with which the reading begins captures our attention. It's followed soon after by two decisive commands – "Listen!" and "Break into shouts of joy" – along with the statements that expand on them. The reading concludes with the bold assertion that "all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God." It calls for confident and joyful delivery from start to finish.

Responsorial Psalm**Ps 97:1–6**

R. All the ends of the earth have seen the saving power of God.

Sing a new song to the Lord
for he has worked wonders.
His right hand and his holy arm
have brought salvation. **R.**

The Lord has made known his salvation;
has shown his justice to the nations.
He has remembered his truth and love
for the house of Israel. **R.**

All the ends of the earth have seen
the salvation of our God.
Shout to the Lord all the earth,
ring out your joy. **R.**

Sing psalms to the Lord with the harp,
with the sound of music.
With trumpets and the sound of the horn
acclaim the King, the Lord. **R.**

Responsorial Psalm

The news of salvation that Isaiah projects into the future is declared by the author of Psalm 97/98 to have already been accomplished. The psalm response – "All the ends of the earth have seen the saving power of God" – comes from verse 3 of the psalm. Its confident claim resonates through the entire prayer, much of which is used in the responsorial psalm today. Whatever evidence led the psalmist of old to this assured conclusion, Christmas Mass-goers will naturally be mindful of how the gospel of salvation in Christ has spread world-wide.

The psalm is set out in the most common form – four stanzas of four lines each – and the language is clear and simple. The one risk that readers may run is that of overlooking the poetic nature of the psalm. They should take care not to run the short lines into one another to create sentences in plain prose. This is a joyous prayer that invites us to a heightened level of praise and it should be delivered as such.

A reading from the letter to the Hebrews 1:1–6

At various times in the past and in various different ways, God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets; but in our own time, the last days, he has spoken to us through his Son, the Son that he has appointed to inherit everything and through whom he made everything there is. He is the radiant light of God's glory and the perfect copy of his nature, sustaining the universe by his powerful command; and now that he has destroyed the defilement of sin, he has gone to take his place in heaven at the right hand of divine Majesty. So he is now as far above the angels as the title which he has inherited is higher than their own name.

God has never said to any angel: You are my Son, today I have become your father, or I will be a father to him and he a son to me. Again, when he brings the First-born into the world, he says: Let all the angels of God worship him.

Second Reading

There are several Sundays in the Ordinary Time of Year B, and four in Year C, when we are treated to a series of readings from the letter to the Hebrews. But on no Sunday or feast day do we ever hear its majestic opening verses except today. They immediately establish the tone and style of the letter, even though reliable information about its author, composition and intended audience remains elusive.

What is clear, however, is that it is a very sophisticated work. It's an extended exhortation, more an oration than a letter. It's composed in high rhetorical style by an author who is not only familiar with Jewish scriptures and Greek philosophy but skilled at using them to advance his argument. It aims at bolstering the wavering faith of a Jewish Christian community by reminding them of the unique status of Jesus Christ. As divine Son and human high priest he has once and for all thrown open the path to God for true believers.

These first verses present the case for Jesus' supreme identity as Son of God. Readers will quickly see they have a challenge on their hands with this text. It will be unfamiliar to the mixed audience they address today and perhaps even to themselves. It is elevated in style, expressed in extended sentences and focussed on what may seem an esoteric issue, the Son's superiority over the angels.

A helpful part of the preparation readers must undertake would be to examine the layout of the text in the NRSV. It is set out in short sense lines. Examining these will clarify what are the essential affirmations that the assembly needs to hear and take away with them. Readers should deliver this text with the conviction that it deserves as the opening statement of the author's case. The final two sentences are a kind of postscript that requires less emphasis.

**A reading from the holy Gospel according to John
1:1–18**

In the beginning was the Word:
the Word was with God and the Word was God.
He was with God in the beginning.
Through him all things came to be,
not one thing had its being but through him.
All that came to be had life in him
and that life was the light of men,
a light that shines in the dark,
a light that darkness could not overpower.

[A man came, sent by God.
His name was John.
He came as a witness,
as a witness to speak for the light,
so that everyone might believe through him.
He was not the light,
only a witness to speak for the light.]

The Word was the true light
that enlightens all men;
and he was coming into the world.
He was in the world
that had its being through him,
and the world did not know him.
He came to his own domain
and his own people did not accept him.
But to all who did accept him
he gave power to become children of God,
to all who believe in the name of him
who was born not out of human stock
or urge of the flesh
or will of man
but of God himself.

The Word was made flesh,
he lived among us, and we saw his glory,
the glory that is his as the only Son of the Father,
full of grace and truth.

[John appears as his witness. He proclaims:
'This is the one of whom I said:
He who comes after me
ranks before me
because he existed before me.'

Indeed, from this fullness we have, all of us, received—
yes, grace in return for grace,
since, though the Law was given through Moses,
grace and truth have come through Jesus Christ.
No one has ever seen God;
it is the only Son, who is nearest to the Father's heart,
who has made him known.]

[*Short Form: omit text in brackets.*]

Gospel

Like the reading from Hebrews, this passage from John's gospel is never heard on any other Sunday or feast day (except on the rare occasion when there is a Second Sunday after Christmas). It is an extraordinary omission. John's Prologue is a profound confession of faith in the incarnation, quite unlike the infancy narratives in Matthew and Luke. It interweaves time and eternity, heaven and earth, the divine and the human, light and darkness, shame and glory.

Its origins may belong in the Wisdom writings of the Old Testament, but if so the author has opted for the masculine Word over feminine Wisdom. The result is a sublime meditation that begins in the heart of God and returns us there via creation, the incarnation, redemption and the life of grace. The inserted sections of John the Baptist may be seen either as interruptions or as antitheses. The Lectionary allows them to be omitted, but sadly the shorter version of the gospel also cuts out the inspiring finale of the prologue.

In sum this text is a wonderful work of art. As such, and given the rarity of its appearance, it deserves to be proclaimed with great thoughtfulness. It calls for a delivery that is reverent, measured and loving.

A Christmas Blessing

May the God of infinite goodness,
who by the Incarnation of his Son has driven darkness from the world
and by that glorious Birth has illumined this most holy day,
drive far from us the darkness of vice
and illumine our hearts with the light of virtue.

Amen.

May God, who willed that the great joy
of his Son's saving Birth
be announced to shepherds by the Angel,
fill our minds with the gladness he gives
and make us heralds of his Gospel.

Amen.

May God, who by the Incarnation
brought together the earthly and heavenly realm,
fill us with the gift of his peace and favour
and make us sharers with the Church in heaven.

Amen.

And may almighty God bless us,
the Father, and the Son, + and the Holy Spirit.

Amen.

(Adapted from the Solemn Blessing for The Nativity of the Lord, Roman Missal p 710)