

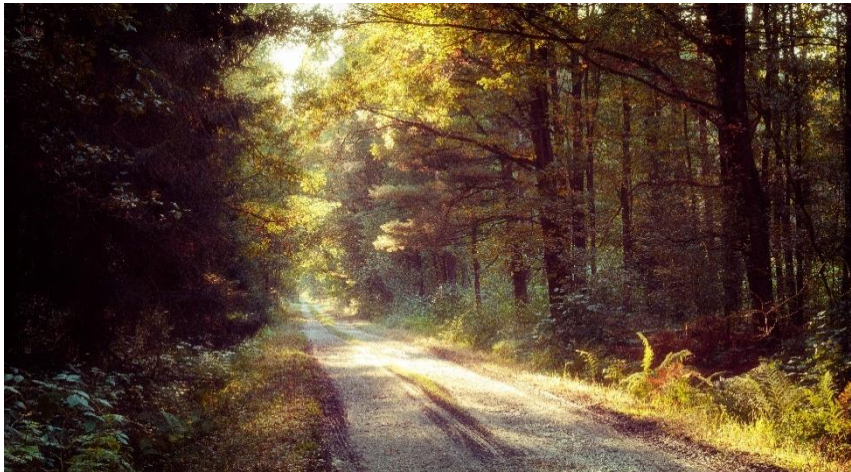
SUNDAY READINGS

READ AT HOME

Second Sunday of Advent

Year A

4 December 2022



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

“. . . the one who follows me . . . will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and fire,” the Baptist declared. Baptism, fire and Holy Spirit are words that prompt the play of Christian imagination. Depending on context, baptism can connote everything from repentance to rebirth to fearful trial. “There is a baptism I must still receive,” Jesus exclaimed, “and how great is my distress till it is over!” (Lk 12:50). In the same vein he challenges James and John: “Can you . . . be baptised with the baptism with which I must be baptised?” (Mk 10:38).

Judgement and purification come to mind when Jesus cries out, “I have come to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were blazing already” (Lk 12:49). Fire can also mean illumination and ardour, as in the tongues of fire on Pentecost Day. Of its nature, “Holy Spirit” conjures up a myriad associations – holiness, wisdom, power, love being just a few.

Even in early Advent we are plunged into the depths of the paschal mystery. As much as the baptismal font is a womb of rebirth in the Spirit, it is equally the tomb in which we die with Christ to rise again.

A reading from the prophet Isaiah 11:1–10

A shoot springs from the stock of Jesse,
a scion thrusts from his roots:
on him the spirit of the Lord rests,
a spirit of wisdom and insight,
a spirit of counsel and power,
a spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the Lord.
(The fear of the Lord is his breath.)
He does not judge by appearances,
he gives no verdict on hearsay,
but judges the wretched with integrity,
and with equity gives a verdict
for the poor of the land.
His word is a rod that strikes the ruthless;
his sentences bring death to the wicked.
Integrity is the loincloth round his waist,
faithfulness the belt about his hips.
The wolf lives with the lamb,
the panther lies down with the kid,
calf and lion cub feed together
with a little boy to lead them.
The cow and the bear make friends,
their young lie down together.
The lion eats straw like the ox.
The infant plays over the cobra's hole;
into the viper's lair the young child puts his hand.
They do no hurt, no harm, on all my holy mountain,
for the country is filled with the knowledge of the Lord
as the waters swell the sea.
That day, the root of Jesse
shall stand as a signal to the peoples.
It will be sought out by the nations
and its home will be glorious.

Responsorial Psalm Ps 71:1–2, 7–8, 12–13, 17

R. Justice shall flourish in his time,
and fullness of peace for ever.

O God, give your judgement to the king,
to a king's son your justice,
that he may judge your people in justice
and your poor in right judgement. **R.**

In his days justice shall flourish
and peace till the moon fails:
He shall rule from sea to sea,
from the Great River to earth's bounds. **R.**

For he shall save the poor when they cry
and the needy who are helpless.
He will have pity on the weak
and save the lives of the poor. **R.**

May his name be blessed for ever
and endure like the sun.
Every tribe shall be blessed in him,
all nations bless his name. **R.**

First Reading

The prophet Isaiah looms large throughout the season of Advent (as well as being the prophet most cited in the lectionary as a whole). Today's reading is one of a series of oracles depicting a wonderful new era for God's people after the trauma of the exile. They will be blessed with a ruler from the house of David (Jesse's son) who will be endowed with the spirit of the Lord. He will be wise, just, faithful and strong, a paragon of integrity.

This list of the ideal king's attributes introduces an idyllic vision of a new paradise. Creatures that are natural foes will co-exist in peace, for the world will be steeped in the knowledge of God. The reading is rounded out with a further reference to the "root of Jesse" (a verse quoted by Paul in Romans 15:12).

In their preparation readers will note several other points taken up by New Testament writers and the Christian tradition, the most obvious being the list of the gifts of the Spirit. The garments of integrity and truth are found again in Ephesians 6:14.

Readers will find this a beautiful text to proclaim. To do it justice, they need to be mindful of three things. The first is that the form of the reading is a visionary poem. It is set out in short lines, each of which should be given its proper time and emphasis. Poetry calls for thoughtful and unhurried recitation. The second is the relative independence of the section on the new paradise. A significant pause before and after this passage will allow the assembly to contemplate the harmony being depicted. Thirdly, with all their sibilants the first lines need to be prepared with care and the pronunciation of "scion" checked.

Responsorial Psalm

Psalm 71/72 is categorised as a royal psalm. It may have been used at the coronation of a king or its anniversary. Two faith convictions lie behind its exaltation of Israel's royal ruler. The first is that he was believed to govern in God's name. The second is that the God of Israel cared for the poor and the needy. On the basis of these two beliefs, the king's reign should properly be characterised by justice, peace and the protection of the weak and helpless. The books of the Old Testament are unsparing in their critique of the many kings who failed to fulfil their divine mandate. The reality was vastly inferior to the ideal. But the ideal was never lost sight of, and that is what is presented in this psalm. It begins as a prayer to God to endow the king with the gift of wise judgement. The next two stanzas express confident faith in the noble qualities that his reign will exhibit. The final verse combines elements of prayer and praise.

Used in the context of Advent, the psalm evokes the promised reign of the Messiah to be born of the house of David. It is set out in the conventional form of four-line verses, and the language is simple and straightforward. Readers, however, will need to take care when announcing the extended, two-part response. An upward inflection at the end of the first phrase will allow a moment's pause before the second is proceeded with.

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

15:4–9

Everything that was written long ago in the scriptures was meant to teach us something about hope from the examples scripture gives of how people who did not give up were helped by God. And may he who helps us when we refuse to give up, help you all to be tolerant with each other, following the example of Christ Jesus, so that united in mind and voice you may give glory to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

It can only be to God's glory, then, for you to treat each other in the same friendly way as Christ treated you. The reason Christ became the servant of circumcised Jews was not only so that God could faithfully carry out the promises made to the patriarchs, it was also to get the pagans to give glory to God for his mercy, as scripture says in one place: For this I shall praise you among the pagans and sing your name.

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

3:1–12

In due course John the Baptist appeared; he preached in the wilderness of Judaea and this was his message: 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is close at hand.' This was the man the prophet spoke of when he said:

A voice cries in the wilderness:
Prepare a way for the Lord,
make his paths straight.

This man John wore a garment made of camel-hair with a leather belt round his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. Then Jerusalem and all Judaea and the whole Jordan district made their way to him, and as they were baptised by him in the river Jordan they confessed their sins. But when he saw a number of Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism he said to them, 'Brood of vipers, who warned you to fly from the retribution that is coming?

But if you are repentant, produce the appropriate fruit, and do not presume to tell yourselves, "We have Abraham for our father," because, I tell you, God can raise children for Abraham from these stones. Even now the axe is laid to the roots of the trees, so that any tree which fails to produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown on the fire. I baptise you in water for repentance, but the one who follows me is more powerful than I am, and I am not fit to carry his sandals; he will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing-fan is in his hand; he will clear his threshing-floor and gather his wheat into the barn; but the chaff he will burn in a fire that will never go out.'

Second Reading

As the season of Advent progresses, the tide of promise launched by the prophets carries us more and more powerfully towards messianic fulfilment. This perspective is reinforced by today's reading from Paul's letter to the Romans. It comes from the concluding chapters, long after Paul's agonised struggle to reconcile God's covenant with Israel with their failure to come to faith in Christ (chs 9-11). Here he simply draws the peaceful conclusion that Jesus not only fulfilled the ancestral promises made to "circumcised Jews" but made it possible for "pagans to give glory to God".

Like the author of the letter to the Hebrews (chs 11-12), Paul invokes the steadfast faith of Jewish believers to encourage his Christian readers to be resolute, tolerant of one another, and united. The example of their forebears in faith, allied with that of Christ, should inspire praise of God's mercy.

This is a quietly encouraging text for readers to proclaim, culminating in its invitation to praise God's name. The challenge they face is with the length of all but one of the sentences. Each requires careful study and practice. Thoughtful pacing and a varied tone will enable readers to lead the assembly through the evolution of Paul's thought and gain a clear grasp of the key points he makes. Readers who have access to the NRSV lectionary will benefit from examining the layout of the text. The sentences are just as long, but helpfully set out in sense lines.

Gospel

Matthew, unlike Luke, introduces the figure of John the Baptist abruptly, with no explanation of his origins. And Matthew alone of the synoptic gospels has the Baptist announce the arrival of the kingdom with the very same words that Jesus uses: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is close at hand".

John's clothes, diet, location and message all echo those of the great prophet Elijah who was expected to return to inaugurate the final judgement. John's message has an apocalyptic tone that anticipates Jesus' lengthy discourse on the end times before his passion and death. The reference to baptism "with the Holy Spirit and fire" has multiple associations – cleansing, purification, inspiration, judgement – that feed our Christian imaginations.

Matthew provides no explanatory introduction to John's diatribe against the religious authorities who are yoked together as "Pharisees and Sadducees". How much this vitriol is influenced by Jesus' own disputes with them or by later conflicts between the Jewish and the Christian communities is unclear. Contemporary scripture scholarship warns against an over-simplification of the issues.

This reading is full of drama and energy. It weaves narrative, proclamation and disputation together into an arresting whole. Readers who convey its colour and passion will have the assembly's full attention.

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)