

SUNDAY READINGS

READ AT HOME

Second Sunday of Advent

Year B

10 December 2023



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

If the first Sunday of Advent serves as a bridge between Ordinary Time and Advent, then the second Sunday is a stepping stone towards the feast of Christmas. Our horizon changes. Without losing sight of the end times that lie before us, we begin to shift focus to the event that transformed human history: the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

We don't home in immediately on the story of Jesus' birth; that will come later. We first allow ourselves to be drawn into ancient Israel's deep and patient longing for the Messiah. We retell the story of John the Baptist whose preaching echoes the prophets of old and whose baptising ushers in a new era of grace. There is good news to be heard, if we can find the time and space at this busy time of the year to listen to the whisper of the Spirit in our hearts.

A reading from the prophet Isaiah 40:1–5, 9–11

'Console my people, console them'
says your God.
'Speak to the heart of Jerusalem
and call to her
that her time of service is ended,
that her sin is atoned for,
that she has received from the hand of the Lord
double punishment for all her crimes.'
A voice cries, 'Prepare in the wilderness
a way for the Lord.
Make a straight highway for our God
across the desert.
Let every valley be filled in,
every mountain and hill be laid low,
let every cliff become a plain,
and the ridges a valley;
then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed
and all mankind shall see it;
for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.'
Go up on a high mountain,
joyful messenger to Zion.
Shout with a loud voice,
joyful messenger to Jerusalem.
Shout without fear,
say to the towns of Judah,
'Here is your God.'
Here is the Lord coming with power,
his arm subduing all things to him.
The prize of his victory is with him,
his trophies all go before him.
He is like a shepherd feeding his flock,
gathering lambs in his arms,
holding them against his breast
and leading to their rest the mother ewes.

First Reading

All who are familiar with Handel's *Messiah* will recognise much of the first reading. He uses the first verses for the opening aria and draws on others later in the first section of the oratorio, matching text and music marvellously to convey the joy of the prophetic message. Those who know the gospels well will be ready to hear this passage used to situate the preaching of John the Baptist.

The text is taken from the chapter which begins the second book of the prophet Isaiah, often called the Book of Consolation. It is indeed a word of comfort and consolation, declared to a people who have suffered exile, promising them home-coming and the return of their glorious shepherd king. It is filled with the imagery of ancient imperial power. A royal highway will be prepared across the forbidding terrain, and the splendour of the divine ruler will be displayed for all to see. Messengers announce the good news from hilltop to hilltop. This triumphant sovereign is Israel's God; his victorious parade offers the guarantee of loving pastoral care for his people.

The whole reading is in the form of a solemn declaration and should be proclaimed with deliberation. It is filled with positive energy; each element needs to be allowed to have its dynamic impact. Readers need to help the congregation hear the different voices that speak during this reading (God and the prophet) and to convey emotions that range from tender comfort to powerful joy.

The familiarity of the text to both reader and hearers may be a mixed blessing. It may help the congregation tune in readily, but it challenges the reader to enable everyone hear it afresh and to thrill again with its joy.

Responsorial Psalm

Ps 84:9–14

R. Lord, let us see your kindness, and grant us your salvation.

I will hear what the Lord God has to say,
a voice that speaks of peace,
peace for his people.

His help is near for those who fear him
and his glory will dwell in our land. **R.**

Mercy and faithfulness have met;
justice and peace have embraced.
Faithfulness shall spring from the earth
and justice look down from heaven. **R.**

The Lord will make us prosper
and our earth shall yield its fruit.
Justice shall march before him
and peace shall follow his steps. **R.**

Responsorial Psalm

The psalm complements the first reading directly. It expresses the people's acceptance of God's word of peace, with all the blessings this implies: mercy, justice and fruitfulness. On its own, the response could be heard as a cry of distress, but in this context it serves as a prayer of confident trust.

Psalm 84/85 may have originated as a prayer for deliverance from exile; the verses that are prayed today constitute its second half. Their content and character invite the reader to proclaim them in a spirit of sure faith. The short lines should not be hurried through, but allowed to communicate the assurance they express. Readers will note that the first verse consists of five lines rather than the more usual four.

A reading from the second letter of St Peter 3:8–14

There is one thing, my friends, that you must never forget: that with the Lord, 'a day' can mean a thousand years, and a thousand years is like a day. The Lord is not being slow to carry out his promises, as anybody else might be called slow; but he is being patient with you all, wanting nobody to be lost and everybody to be brought to change his ways. The Day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then with a roar the sky will vanish, the elements will catch fire and fall apart, the earth and all that it contains will be burnt up.

Since everything is coming to an end like this, you should be living holy and saintly lives while you wait and long for the Day of God to come, when the sky will dissolve in flames and the elements melt in the heat. What we are waiting for is what he promised: the new heavens and new earth, the place where righteousness will be at home. So then, my friends, while you are waiting, do your best to live lives without spot or stain so that he will find you at peace.

A reading from the Gospel according to Mark 1:1–8

The beginning of the Good News about Jesus Christ, the Son of God. It is written in the book of the prophet Isaiah:

Look, I am going to send my messenger before you;
he will prepare your way.
A voice cries in the wilderness:
Prepare a way for the Lord,
make his paths straight,

and so it was that John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. All Judaea and all the people of Jerusalem made their way to him, and as they were baptised by him in the river Jordan they confessed their sins. John wore a garment of camel-skin, and he lived on locusts and wild honey. In the course of his preaching he said, 'Someone is following me, someone who is more powerful than I am, and I am not fit to kneel down and undo the strap of his sandals. I have baptised you with water, but he will baptise you with the Holy Spirit.'

Second Reading

This is the only Sunday in the whole three-year cycle on which we hear from the second letter of Peter. Opinions differ as to who wrote the letter (whether Peter himself or a later disciple invoking his name), when it was written (perhaps as early as the year 65 or as late as 150), and to whom it was sent. The work is short and sharp. In response to "false prophets" it offers a vigorous defence of Judaeo-Christian moral norms in the light of hope for "new heavens and a new earth".

In this passage the author draws on conventional apocalyptic imagery to depict the Day of the Lord: "with a roar the sky will vanish, the elements will catch fire and fall apart . . . the sky will dissolve in flames and the elements melt in the heat".

Frightening language like this may have contributed to the thirteenth century poem known as the *Dies irae* that used to be prayed at Catholic funerals.

In spite of the fearful nature of the images – "the Day of the Lord will come like a thief" – the overall tone of the reading is one of encouragement and hope. It speaks of the Lord's promises and patience, it looks forward to "the new heavens and new earth", and it encourages right living in peace.

Readers should take advantage of the vivid imagery to proclaim this text with energy and conviction, but without allowing their delivery to become theatrical. In the end the reading is meant to persuade listeners to live by the gospel in the hope of a new world.

Gospel

The gospel writer Mark wastes no time with the start of his gospel. He bluntly declares what he is writing and plunges straight into the story. While Matthew, Luke and John concern themselves at length with Jesus' origins (whether from Abraham, Adam, or God respectively), Mark abruptly names Jesus Christ as Son of God. Then he cuts to the chase, identifying the Baptist with the prophetic words of Isaiah and Malachi.

His description of John and his ministry is typically vivid and engaging. He paints a picture that is easy for us to imagine in concrete detail. We can visualise the wilderness, the Jordan, the crowds, and above all the Baptist himself, garbed in camel-skin, living off the land, preaching the word, and thrusting sinners into the water.

But for all that, the focus is not the Baptist himself but the greater one who is to baptise with the Holy Spirit. Thus the reading serves as a prelude for what is yet to come. It stirs our hope and expectation that the long-awaited one will appear in our midst.

An alternative translation of the scripture readings is given here from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV). This may be particularly useful for those in parishes which use the NRSV Lectionary.

SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT

FIRST READING (NRSV)

A reading from the book of the prophet Isaiah 40:1–5, 9–11

Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God.
Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her
that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid,
that she has received from the Lord's hand
double for all her sins.

A voice cries out:

"In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord,
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

Every valley shall be lifted up,
and every mountain and hill be made low;
the uneven ground shall become level,
and the rough places a plain.

Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed,
and all people shall see it together;
for the mouth of the Lord has spoken."

Get you up to a high mountain,

O Zion, herald of good tidings;

lift up your voice with strength,

O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings,

lift it up, do not fear;

say to the cities of Judah, "Here is your God!"

See, the Lord God comes with might,

and his arm rules for him; his reward is with him,

and his recompense before him.

He will feed his flock like a shepherd;

he will gather the lambs in his arms,

and carry them in his bosom,

and gently lead the mother sheep.

SECOND READING (NRSV)

A reading from the second letter of Peter 3:8–15

Do not ignore this one fact, beloved,
that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years,
and a thousand years are like one day.

The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness,
but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish,
but all to come to repentance.

But the day of the Lord will come like a thief,
and then the heavens will pass away with a loud noise,
and the elements will be dissolved with fire,
and the earth and everything that is done on it will be disclosed.

Since all these things are to be dissolved in this way,
what sort of persons ought you to be
in leading lives of holiness and godliness,
waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God,
because of which the heavens will be set ablaze and dissolved,
and the elements will melt with fire?

But, in accordance with his promise,
we wait for new heavens and a new earth,
where righteousness is at home.
Therefore, beloved, while you are waiting for these things,
strive to be found by him at peace,
without spot or blemish;
and regard the patience of our Lord as salvation.

GOSPEL (NRSV)

A reading from the holy gospel according to Mark 1:1–8

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ,
the Son of God.

As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,
"See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way;
the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:
'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.'"

John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness,
proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.
And people from the whole Judean countryside
and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him,
and were baptized by him in the river Jordan,
confessing their sins.

Now John was clothed with camel's hair;
with a leather belt around his waist,
and he ate locusts and wild honey.

He proclaimed,
"The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me;
I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals.
I have baptized you with water;
but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

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)