

FIRST READING – X CHRISTMAS MIDNIGHT

A reading from the book of the prophet Isaiah.

Pause – and look up at the assembly

The people who walked in darkness
have seen a great light;
those who lived in a land of deep darkness –
on them light has shined.
You have multiplied the nation,
you have increased its joy;
they rejoice before you
as with joy at the harvest,
as people exult when dividing plunder.

For the yoke of their burden,
and the bar across their shoulders,
the rod of their oppressor,
you have broken as on the day of Midian.

For a child has been born for us,
a son given to us;
authority rests upon his shoulders;
and he is named
Wonderful Counsellor,
Mighty God,
Everlasting Father,
Prince of Peace.

His authority shall grow continually,
and there shall be endless peace
for the throne of David and his kingdom.
He will establish and uphold it
with justice and with righteousness
from this time onward and forevermore.
The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this.



PAUSE for **THREE** seconds
then look up at the people
and say SLOWLY:

The **WORD** of the **LORD**.

Thanks be to God.

SECOND READING – X CHRISTMAS MIDNIGHT

A reading from the letter of Saint Paul to Titus.

Pause – and look up at the assembly

The grace of God has appeared,
bringing salvation to all,
training us to renounce sinfulness and worldly passions,
and in the present age to live lives
that are self-controlled, upright, and godly,
while we wait for the blessed hope
and the appearance of the glory of our great God and Saviour,
Jesus Christ.

He it is who gave himself for us
that he might redeem us from all wickedness
and purify for himself a people of his own
who are keen to do good deeds.



PAUSE for **THREE** seconds
then look up at the people
and say SLOWLY:

The **WORD** of the **LORD**.

Thanks be to God.

GOSPEL READING – X CHRISTMAS MIDNIGHT

The Lord be with you.

And also with you.

A reading from the holy gospel according to Luke.

Glory to you, O Lord.

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered.

This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria.

All went to their own towns to be registered.

Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea,

to the city of David called Bethlehem,

because he was descended from the house and family of David.

He went to be registered with Mary,

to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child.

While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child.

And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth,

and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night.

Then an angel of the Lord stood before them,

and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified.

But the angel said to them,

"Do not be afraid; for see - I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord.

This will be a sign for you:

you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger."

And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of those in heaven, praising God and saying,

"Glory to God in the highest heaven,

and on earth peace among those whom God favours!"

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven,

the shepherds said to one another,

"Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us."

So they went quickly and found Mary and Joseph,

and the child lying in the manger.



The gospel of the Lord.

Praise to you, Lord Jesus Christ.

Reading I: Isaiah 9:1-6

This is the most famous of all the messianic prophecies of Isaiah. Its original meaning was very different from the associations that have grown up around it in Christian use during this season.

It may have been composed originally as a liturgical anthem to be sung on the occasion of the coronation of the Davidic kings of Judah. Every time a new descendant of David ascended the throne, it was hoped (note the irrepressible hope of Old Testament religion!) that this king would in fact prove to be the ideal king.

The joy of the occasion is expressed by two comparisons: the joy of harvest and the joy of victory on the battlefield ([Is 9:3](#)). The new reign ushers in freedom from want and freedom from oppression (for the allusion to Midian, see [Judg 6-8](#)) and peace (the burning of the bloody debris of the battlefield).

The “birth” of the child ([Is 9:6](#)) was actually the enthronement of the king, which in the royal theology was conceived as God’s adoption of the king as his son (see [Ps 2:7](#)).

The king is hailed by a series of royal titles. This is one of the few places (cf. [Ps 45:6](#)) where the king is actually called “God.” Usually it was anathema for Israelite religion, even in the royal theology, to go as far as that, though it was common enough in the surrounding nations.

Probably we should understand the king’s divinity in a modified sense: he is the embodiment of God’s own kingship, God’s representative on earth.

Christian faith reinterprets this passage.

The joy is the joy of Christ’s advent, which ushers in deliverance for the oppressed ([Lk 4:18](#)) and peace between God and humankind ([Jn 14:27](#)). The words “a child has been born for us” now suggest the birth at Bethlehem rather than the enthronement of a king.

This reminds us that the birth of Jesus is only the beginning of the Christ event, that the Nativity really stands for the total advent of Christ, the whole saving act of God in him.

Finally, it seems more appropriate to hail Jesus rather than the king of Judah as “God.” Yet, even here we must be careful. The New Testament never refers to Jesus as God without qualification. Jesus is not *Deus in se* (such a notion would compromise the unity of God), but *Deus pro nobis*—God turned to us in grace and salvation.

Responsorial Psalm 96: 1-2, 2-3, 11-12, 13

This is probably the most magnificent of all the enthronement psalms that celebrate the kingship of Yhwh. Much of its content also appears in another place in the Old Testament, namely, [1 Chr 16](#), a cento of psalms put together by the Chronicler to mark the bringing of the ark into the temple by David.

The theme of a “new song” can be traced all through the Bible. The old song was sung by Moses and Israel at the Red Sea ([Ex 15](#)). One might say that the whole liturgy of the old Israel was a continuation of this old song. But it lost its zest with the passage of time and especially in the Exile: “How shall we sing the Lord’s song in a strange land?” So Second Isaiah looks for a new song to be sung after the return ([Is 51:11](#)).

This hope for a new song was disappointed at that time, and the new song became part of Israel's eschatological expectation.

In the Book of Revelation, the new song's promise is fulfilled at last in the celebration of the victory of the Lamb. Christmas marks the first step toward that victory, so the Church can already here and now take up the new song (as it always does in its liturgy).

In the birth at Bethlehem, Yhwh truly comes to judge and save the world.

Reading II: Titus 2:11-14

This passage speaks of the two comings of Christ: (1) "the grace of God has appeared," that is, in the Christ event (and Bethlehem marks the inception of its appearance); (2) "while we wait for the blessed hope and the manifestation of the glory..."

The Second Coming, which had been the dominant theme at the beginning of Advent but had receded into the background as the season progressed and the expectation of the birth of Christ took over, is not completely forgotten now that Christmas has come.

For it is only in the light of the Second Coming that we can celebrate the first coming. People who forget this sentimentalize Christmas into a "Baby Jesus" cult.

In the Nativity, Christ comes first in great humility in anticipation of his coming again in majesty and great glory. It is especially fitting that this note should be struck at the Midnight Mass of Christmas, for much of our traditional imagery speaks of the Lord's Second Coming as taking place at midnight. This imagery is found in the parable of the ten virgins: "At midnight there was a shout, 'Look! Here is the bridegroom!'" ([Mt 25:6](#)).

Gospel: Luke 2:1-14

The infancy narratives in Matthew and Luke pose very difficult problems for those who would use them to reconstruct actual history. The two narratives agree on the following points: the names of Mary and Joseph as the parents of Jesus; his supernatural conception and Bethlehem as the place of his birth; and the dating of his birth in the reign of King Herod. Clearly these items go back to earlier tradition, prior to the evangelists.

Is the location of Jesus' birth at Bethlehem simply an expression of faith in his Davidic messiahship (see [Mic 5](#))? Probably this question will never be answered. Then there is the unsolved problem of the census.

Luke dates it during the period when Quirinius was legate of Syria. This we know from Josephus to have been from 6 to 9 CE, a dating that appears to be confirmed by the fact that Josephus places the first census in Judea (see Acts 5:37) at about 6 CE. This was immediately after Judea came under Roman rule—a more plausible reason for a Roman census than at the time when Judea was still a quasi-independent kingdom.

But this dating for the census clashes with Luke's other statement, supported by Matthew, that Jesus was born in the reign of Herod, that is, not later than 4 BCE.

Many attempts have been made to vindicate Luke's account of the nativity census. For instance, it has been suggested, on the basis of remarks by Josephus, that Quirinius had already been in Syria as early

as 10-7 BCE.with a legatine commission.

But the neatest solution, proposed not long ago, is a different though perfectly plausible translation of [Lk 2:2](#): “This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria.”

Another problem is that we have no evidence for people returning for a census from their normal domiciles to their ancestral homes.

These historical problems should warn us that, in the words of the *Jerome Biblical Commentary* (original edition), “the details of the narrative are symbolic and biblical; they communicate the mystery of redemption, not a diary of early events.” That is certainly how the narrative should be heard at the first Mass of Christmas.

We should probably not romanticize the shepherds. They had a bad reputation as thieves, and in any case they were poor. In fact, as Joachim Jeremias has shown, they were classed with tax collectors and prostitutes as members of despised trades. This fits in perfectly with the emphasis of Luke’s Gospel.

The angelic announcement is the biblical way of bringing out the meaning of an event in salvation history (see the annunciation stories). This is the birth of One who is to be the Savior, the Christ (Messiah), and Lord. In the second proclamation, made by the “multitude of the heavenly host,” not his titles but the effects of the Christ event are announced: glory to God and peace (with the full meaning of *shalom*) among people.

The words “among those he favors” vary in the Greek texts. The King James Version favored a text that gave the sense “good will [i.e., God’s good will or favor] toward men.” The Vulgate preferred a reading that yielded, literally, the sense “to men of good will.” This is probably the right text, but the literal meaning is badly misleading.

“Men of good will” is a Semitic idiom that means people who are the objects of God’s favor. So actually the Vulgate reading comes to very much the same thing as the King James translation. This is a warning against much of the loose talk about people “of good will” that goes on at Christmas time, especially in the secular world.

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