

SUNDAY READINGS

READ AT HOME

Second Sunday of Advent

Year B

6 December 2020



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.

Responsorial Psalm

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.**

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

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.

Concluding Prayers

Almighty and all-merciful God,
lover of the human race, healer of all our wounds,
in whom there is no shadow of death,
save us in this time of crisis;
grant wisdom and courage to our leaders;
watch over all medical people
as they tend the sick and work for a cure;
stir in us a sense of solidarity beyond all isolation;
if our doors are closed, let our hearts be open.
By the power of your love destroy the virus of fear,
that hope may never die
and the light of Easter, the triumph of life,
may shine upon us and the whole world.
Through Jesus Christ, the Lord risen from the dead,
who lives and reigns for ever and ever.
Amen.

Holy Mary, health of the sick, pray for us.
St Joseph, guardian of us all, pray for us.

(Most Rev. Mark Coleridge, Archbishop of Brisbane)

or

Gracious God,
We give thanks anew for your providence and presence.
We prayerfully seek your grace, amidst COVID-19 here and overseas.
We pray for those in need of healing.
We pray for your peace with those who are anxious or grieving.
We pray you will continue to strengthen and sustain
all those who are serving in response.
We pray for your Holy Spirit's discernment
amidst the many choices and decisions
facing our national, community and medical leaders.
We pray we each might see quickly what more we can do
to help those who are vulnerable.
This prayer for our nation in the family of nations,
with all that is on our hearts,
we gather now and pray
through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.

(Ecumenical prayer from the National Council of Churches. We have been invited to pray this prayer at 7pm each day.)