

SUNDAY READINGS

READ AT HOME

Fourth Sunday of Advent

Year B

20 December 2020



Collect

Pour forth, we beseech you, O Lord,
your grace into our hearts,
that we, to whom the Incarnation of Christ your Son
was made known by the message of an Angel,
may by his Passion and Cross
be brought to the glory of his Resurrection.
Who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, for ever and ever.
Amen.

Readings and Commentaries

Our spirit of hope has been growing in intensity as the weeks of Advent have passed. In a rather paradoxical way we have been encouraged to look forward by progressively moving back in time. We began with the final day of the Lord, then turned our attention to the mission of John the Baptist, and now we focus on the birth of the Messiah.

All this looking both to the future and to the past serves but one purpose: that we live joyfully and faithfully in the present. Such a simple thing to state, but such a challenge to achieve. It is only by God's grace that we can live in the present, free from the burden of a dead past and untroubled by fear of an unknown future. For this grace we give thanks today.

A reading from the second book of Samuel
7:1–5, 8-12, 14, 16

Once David had settled into his house and the Lord had given him rest from all the enemies surrounding him, the king said to the prophet Nathan, 'Look, I am living in a house of cedar while the ark of God dwells in a tent.' Nathan said to the king, 'Go and do all that is in your mind, for the Lord is with you.'

But that very night the word of the Lord came to Nathan:

'Go and tell my servant David, "Thus the Lord speaks: Are you the man to build me a house to dwell in? I took you from the pasture, from following the sheep, to be leader of my people Israel; I have been with you on all your expeditions; I have cut off all your enemies before you. I will give you fame as great as the fame of the greatest on earth. I will provide a place for my people Israel; I will plant them there and they shall dwell in that place and never be disturbed again; nor shall the wicked continue to oppress them as they did, in the days when I appointed judges over my people Israel; I will give them rest from all their enemies. The Lord will make you great; the Lord will make you a House. And when your days are ended and you are laid to rest with your ancestors, I will preserve the offspring of your body after you and make his sovereignty secure. I will be a father to him and he a son to me. Your House and your sovereignty will always stand secure before me and your throne be established for ever."

Responsorial Psalm **Ps 88:2–5, 27, 29**

R. For ever I will sing the goodness of the Lord.

I will sing for ever of your love, O Lord;
through all ages my mouth will proclaim your truth.
Of this I am sure, that your love lasts for ever,
that your truth is firmly established as the
heavens. **R.**

'I have made a covenant with my chosen one;
I have sworn to David my servant:
I will establish your dynasty for ever
and set up your throne through all ages.' **R.**

He will say to me: 'You are my father,
my God, the rock who saves me.'
I will keep my love for him always;
for him my covenant shall endure. **R.**

First Reading

It may not be obvious to contemporary believers, especially those unfamiliar with the Old Testament, that today's first reading, from the second book of Samuel, is a highly political manifesto. It presents a ringing endorsement of a particular theological tradition in Jewish history. It declares divine approval for the royal house of David and for the building of the temple in Jerusalem. Together these two initiatives will assure Israel of peace ("rest from their enemies").

But both of these were contentious issues in ancient times, and elsewhere the scriptures record dissenting points of view. A trace of this can be found in verses 6-7 that have been omitted from today's passage – a timely reminder that it is always valuable to compare the lectionary text with the full version in the Bible.

The reading as we have it revolves around a contrast. It is not David who will build a house (i.e. a temple) for the Lord, but the Lord who will build a house (i.e. a royal dynasty) for David. David's desire to build a temple – "Look, I am living in a house of cedar while the ark of God dwells in a tent" – is countered later in the reading by the Lord's reply – "The Lord will make you great; the Lord will make you a House". Readers will need to ensure that the congregation grasps this fundamental dynamic.

The reading as a whole offers a constant message of assurance. The Lord promises his people a place of rest and security, and pledges everlasting faithfulness. This promise and pledge will be remembered in the gospel for today. Since the bulk of the reading is in the form of God's word to David, it should be read with a suitable degree of solemnity.

Responsorial Psalm

Psalm 88/89 mirrors the theme of the first reading. It's a lengthy song of praise to God for creation and for the choice of David and his descendants as kings of Israel. The verses for today are taken from the beginning and the middle of the psalm.

The response is a slight variation on the first verse of the psalm. It is expressed in the first person singular but gives voice to our common desire to sing God's praises.

Readers will note that that the first verse is spoken by this faith-filled individual, but the remaining two are spoken in God's name. This transition from human response to divine initiative may not be easy for the reader to convey. What remains the same is the joyful recognition of God's steadfast love.

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

16:25–27

Glory to him who is able to give you the strength to live according to the Good News I preach, and in which I proclaim Jesus Christ, the revelation of a mystery kept secret for endless ages, but now so clear that it must be broadcast to pagans everywhere to bring them to the obedience of faith. This is only what scripture has predicted, and it is all part of the way the eternal God wants things to be. He alone is wisdom; give glory therefore to him through Jesus Christ for ever and ever. Amen.

**A reading from the holy Gospel according to Luke
1:26–38**

The angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man named Joseph, of the House of David; and the virgin's name was Mary. He went in and said to her, 'Rejoice, so highly favoured! The Lord is with you.' She was deeply disturbed by these words and asked herself what this greeting could mean, but the angel said to her, 'Mary, do not be afraid; you have won God's favour. Listen! You are to conceive and bear a son, and you must name him Jesus. He will be great and will be called Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his ancestor David; he will rule over the House of Jacob for ever and his reign will have no end.' Mary said to the angel, 'But how can this come about, since I am a virgin?' 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you' the angel answered 'and the power of the Most High will cover you with its shadow. And so the child will be holy and will be called Son of God. Know this too: your kinswoman Elizabeth has, in her old age, herself conceived a son, and she whom people called barren is now in her sixth month, for nothing is impossible to God.' 'I am the handmaid of the Lord,' said Mary 'let what you have said be done to me.' And the angel left her.

Second Reading

The text for today's second reading is the short burst of praise that concludes Paul's magisterial letter to the Romans. This is the only letter of Paul that ends with a doxology; perhaps the prayer came independently from a Christian worship service and was added to the letter as a conclusion. The effect is an unusual continuity of prayerful praise between the psalm and the second reading. In that sense the reader does not have to change gear.

However the first sentence of the reading does pose a challenge. It's another of those typically Pauline passages where the thoughts tumble out one after the other and create a rather complex unit. Readers will need to practice it carefully. The opening declaration is strong: "Glory to him . . . the Good News I preach". The remainder of the sentence is like a long appendix prompted by mention of the "Good News". The reader's task is to sustain the congregation's attention throughout this passage, enabling them to grasp the unfolding of Paul's thought.

The remaining sentences are relatively short and clear. One further challenge is for the reader to proclaim the "Amen" as a decisive conclusion to the reading without the congregation automatically joining in. Readers using the NRSV will find it a mixed blessing. It is set out in helpful sense lines, but leaves the entire passage as a single unbroken sentence which only reaches its climax at the last moment.

Gospel

Since the gospel of Mark gives no account of how Jesus came to be born, the lectionary turns to the gospel of Luke for today's Mass. The passage chosen – that of the annunciation – recurs often on feast days of Mary but, surprisingly, is only heard on Sunday once every three years, on this fourth Sunday of Advent.

After first focusing on the end times, then on John the Baptist, Advent finally encourages us explicitly to prepare for the birth of the Saviour. The story of the annunciation is very familiar, so much so that it may be useful to find fresh insight from some of the masterpieces of art it has inspired. Luke's narrative is a work of art in its own right. He draws on ancient traditions to craft an account of something that is unimaginably new. This son of David will be Son of God.

Luke invites us to contemplate the scene once more and wonder at the interplay of divine initiative and human response, of grace and nature. He also drops a hint of the great mystery that lies ahead: Mary's response – "let what you have said be done to me" – will find its counterpart in Jesus' prayer – "not my will but yours be done" – in the garden of Gethsemane.

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.)