

Commentary on Mass Scriptures

Christmas Day – the Nativity of the Lord

Mass during the Night

First reading

(Isaiah 9 .2-4, 6-7)

The Hope of Israel

This prophecy of Isaiah promises a joyful reversal after the threats of the Assyrian invasion of Jerusalem in 732Bc. The devastating Assyrian armies had plundered the northern kingdom of Israel and seemed certain to repeat this exploit on Judah and Jerusalem in the south. Amazingly, they turned away.

At the same time Isaiah promises a son of the royal line of David, who will bring peace with justice and righteousness. This son is described in exaggerated terms that we Christians see to be fulfilled only in Jesus, the Second David, the true Son of God. He will be Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace, each pair of titles having a marvellous, transcendent air. Such promises sustained the hopes of the nation through the grim period of the Exile and the succession of foreign rulers which dominated the return from Exile. As the hated Roman occupation became more burdensome, the hopes of delivery through this promised heir of David became more and more vivid in Israel, as we see from the Jewish literature of the years immediately preceding the birth of Jesus. It is in terms of the heir to David and Son of God that Mary received the message of the angel at the Annunciation.

Question:

In what way does Jesus fulfil these promises?

Second reading:

(Titus 2.11-14)

The Appearing of Our Saviour

The author of the letter sees God primarily as the Saviour, who wishes all people to be saved through Christ, also our Saviour. In the Old Testament, God is often called the Saviour of his people, but in the letters to Timothy and Titus this title is with equal frequency transferred to Jesus our Saviour, perhaps as a divine title.

This reading is chosen to celebrate Christmas because it speaks twice of the appearing or manifestation (the same word in Greek) of our Saviour, and the Church Fathers often consider the moment of this Appearing at the Incarnation rather than the Resurrection to be the moment of salvation. It is celebrated as the moment when God became man so that man might be raised to the divine. Accordingly, the Eastern Church celebrates rather the Epiphany (or Appearing) of the Lord. However, the letter stresses that we must respond to this Appearing of the grace of God by preparing for the final Appearing. Thus the classic formulation speaks of the threefold coming of Christ: in history (at Bethlehem), in mystery (coming into our hearts) and in majesty (at the final coming in glory).

Question:

Is it possible or useful to locate salvation at one particular historical moment?

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Gospel:

(Luke 2.1-16)

The Birth of Jesus

Luke's account of the birth of Jesus stresses especially the poverty of the family: Christ comes to the poor and is greeted by the poor. Mary and Joseph are displaced persons, and can find no decent place for the baby to be born. There is no space in the living quarters and he has to be put in a feeding trough among the animals. He is greeted not by the rich presents of the magnificent Wise Men from the east, but by impoverished hired shepherds, guarding flocks in the winter night. He is born to be the patron of the homeless and of displaced persons.

But Jesus is also the fulfilment of the hopes of the Old Testament. The families of both John the Baptist and Jesus are eminently faithful to the prescriptions of the Law, waiting for the salvation promised to Israel. In the Temple, Jesus will be greeted by Simeon and Anna, the representatives of fidelity to the Old Law. The birth of Jesus at Bethlehem shows that he is born as the heir to the promises to David, that God would build David a house of everlasting sovereignty, whose king would be the son of God and would call God his Father.

Question:

What can I do for someone poor or unhappy this Christmas?

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Christmas Day – the Nativity of the Lord

Mass during the Day

First reading:

(Isaiah 52.7-10)

All the Ends of the Earth shall see Salvation

This reading, from the second part of Isaiah, written on the eve of the ending of Israel's exile in Babylon, is full of the joys of the impending return to Jerusalem. After the years of waiting and doubt, the author envisages a messenger coming into view on the mountains with the announcement of the good news of peace, salvation and the return to the ruins of Jerusalem. When the city was sacked and its people dragged (literally, on meat hooks) across the desert into exile, it had seemed that their God could not protect them. Now comes the confirmation that, after all, God is king and overcomes all opposition.

Furthermore, a new dimension has opened out, for God brings salvation not merely to Israel but to the whole world, to 'the ends of the earth'. This is especially significant for Christians, since it was the expression used by the Risen Lord before the Ascension as his apostles are about to set out on their worldwide mission of bringing the good news to all nations. It is, therefore, a valuable reminder on the day of Christmas that the festival is not merely a family celebration but is the beginning of the Christian mission to bring God's hope and promise to the whole world.

Question:

How can I be a messenger of good news announcing peace?

Second reading:

(Hebrews 1.1-6)

The Heir of All Things

The Letter to the Hebrews concentrates on the true humanity of Christ, who is also uniquely exalted, and also on Christ's priesthood. Here, at the opening of the letter, both these themes are sketched. Christ is higher than the angels, the very powers of God who accomplish the works of God and are the highest of all created beings. It is through these powers of God that God's will is accomplished, but Christ is incomparably higher than the angels.

As 'the reflection of God's glory' and 'the imprint of God's being', Christ is spoken of in terms of God's Wisdom. In the Old Testament, God's Wisdom is seen as the image, the reflection, the emanation of God through which God creates, and by which God is mirrored in the world, the way in which God's power and goodness is perceived. At the same time, in history as man, Christ has made purification for sins and has been exalted to the right hand of God. The whole history of salvation is hinted in these phrases, which express both the approach of God to human beings by the incarnation, and the exaltation of humanity by- the vindication of Christ at his Resurrection and Ascension.

Question:

In this reading, which to you is the most powerful expression of the divinity of Christ?

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Gospel:

(John 1.1-18)

The Word made Flesh

The Prologue of St John has a special place in Christian theology, and for centuries was recited at the end of the Mass as summing up the whole work of redemption. It begins with God's creation by the Word, and ends with the completion of the purpose of creation through the grace and truth of Jesus Christ.

In the centre, comes the incarnation, which enables and invites those who accept Christ to become children of God. The gospel story of Mark begins at the baptism of Jesus, and the voice from heaven declaring that he is God's son. Matthew and Luke add the infancy stories to show that Jesus possessed and manifested these divine qualities right from his birth. John goes back beyond this, to meditate on the ultimate part in both creation and its fulfilment of the Word who became flesh.

Perhaps the most exultant cry of all is 'we have seen his glory', for glory belongs rightly to God alone. This statement contains the paradox that Christ as a human being made visible this divine glory, and that it was his own glory, witnessed by the followers among whom he lived and moved. It is their tradition that will be expressed in the gospel story that follows and is celebrated through the year.

Question:

What does 'we have seen his glory' mean?
