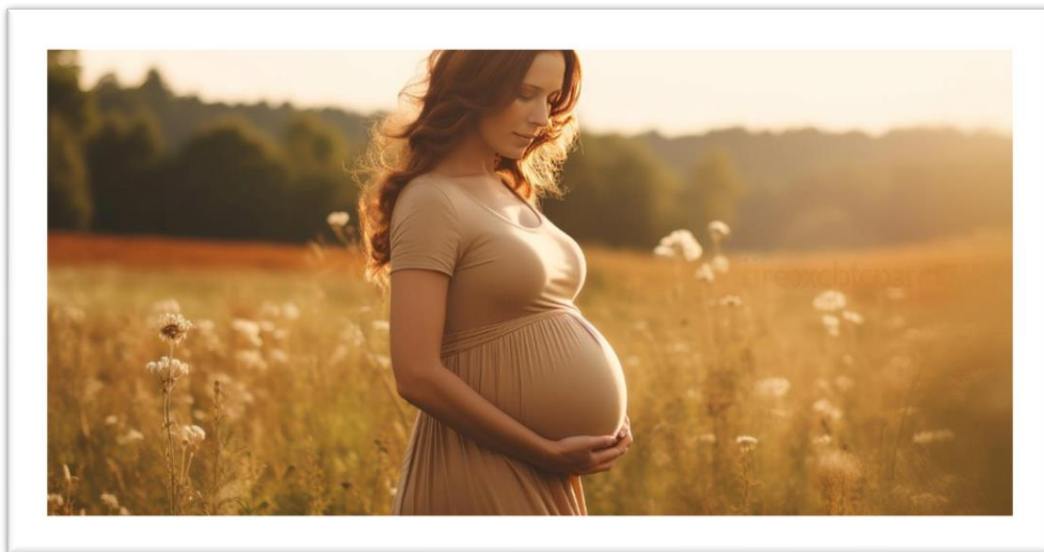


FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT – 22 DECEMBER 2024



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 REFLECTIONS

The Christmas novena begins on 17 December and culminates on Christmas Day. In these days, the focus of the Advent season shifts to look at the story of how Jesus came to be born. These infancy narratives are found at the beginning of the Gospels of Luke and Matthew, to which we can add the powerful and poetic Prologue to the Gospel of John.

Today we have the amazing encounter between the two pregnant women, Mary and her cousin Elizabeth. Elizabeth's exclamation points directly to the Christmas mystery of the incarnation. Her words form an important part of the beloved prayer the 'Hail Mary'. Readers might like to pray this prayer as they prepare to proclaim these texts in the Sunday assembly.

We know that Mary's response to Elizabeth's words was one of profound humility, attributing greatness only to God's mercy. *My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord and my spirit exults in God my saviour, because he has looked upon his lowly handmaid....* This text is not read but is in the background of today's gospel.

A reading from the prophet Micah

5:1–4

The Lord says this:

You, Bethlehem Ephrathah,
the least of the clans of Judah,
out of you will be born for me
the one who is to rule over Israel;
his origin goes back to the distant past,
to the days of old.

The Lord is therefore going to abandon them
till the time when she who is to give birth gives birth.
Then the remnant of his brothers will come back
to the sons of Israel.

He will stand and feed his flock
with the power of the Lord,
with the majesty of the name of his God.
They will live secure, for from then on he will extend
his power
to the ends of the land.
He himself will be peace.

First Reading

Sadly, this is the only time that we hear words from the prophet Micah on a Sunday. Readers might know his famous words: *to act justly, to love tenderly and to walk humbly with your God* (6:8), but they are only heard on a weekday.

The opening words of today's reading might also sound familiar because they are quoted by Matthew when Herod asks the wise men from the East where the Christ was to be born. We will hear this text on the feast of the Epiphany.

Micah speaks out against corruption and injustice, but here he offers words of hope. A leader will be born whose mission will be to gather the people in peace. He will symbolise God's power and all will be secure under God's care.

The reader should practice aloud the pronunciation of Ephrathah ('ĕf—frð—THāh). Look carefully at the phraseology of the first long and enigmatic sentence. The climax of the reading occurs towards the end with the references to power and majesty. Make the final short sentence an emphatic affirmation.

Responsorial Psalm Ps 79:2–3, 15–16, 18–19

R. Lord, make us turn to you;
let us see your face and we shall be saved.

○ shepherd of Israel, hear us,
shine forth from your cherubim throne.

○ Lord, rouse up your might,
○ Lord, come to our help. **R.**

God of hosts, turn again, we implore,
look down from heaven and see.

Visit this vine and protect it,
the vine your right hand has planted. **R.**

May your hand be on the man you have chosen,
the man you have given your strength.
And we shall never forsake you again:
give us life that we may call upon your name. **R.**

Responsorial Psalm

These few verses from Psalm 79/80 implore God's help. The reader/cantor might concentrate on the strong verbs: *hear us, shine forth, rouse up, come, turn again we implore...*

The response asks God to make us turn to him: conversion is always God's gift. We are saved when God lets us look upon the divine face.

For the third Sunday in a row, readers have a two-part response to announce. It is an important text and needs to be proclaimed with care. Hold the pitch at the end of the first part so that the people are waiting for the second. Then they will be able to repeat it with confidence as their heart-felt prayer for God's help.

A reading from the letter to the Hebrews

10:5–10

This is what Christ said, on coming into the world:

You who wanted no sacrifice or oblation,
prepared a body for me.
You took no pleasure in holocausts
or sacrifices for sin;
then I said,
just as I was commanded
in the scroll of the book,
'God, here I am!
I am coming to obey your will.'

Notice that he says first:

You did not want what the Law lays
down as the things to be offered, that is:
the sacrifices, the oblations, the holocausts
and the sacrifices for sin,
and you took no pleasure in them;
and then he says: Here I am!
I am coming to obey your will. He is abolishing
the first sort to replace it with the second. And this
will was for us to be made holy by the offering of
his body made once and for all by Jesus Christ.

A reading from the holy Gospel according to Luke

1:39–44

Mary set out and went as quickly as she could to
a town in the hill country of Judah. She went into
Zechariah's house and greeted Elizabeth. Now as
soon as Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child
leapt in her womb and Elizabeth was filled with
the Holy Spirit. She gave a loud cry and said, 'Of
all women you are the most blessed, and blessed
is the fruit of your womb. Why should I be
honoured with a visit from the mother of my Lord?
For the moment your greeting reached my ears,
the child in my womb leapt for joy. Yes, blessed is
she who believed that the promise made her by
the Lord would be fulfilled.'

Second Reading

This is a difficult text, both for the reader to
proclaim and for the assembly to hear and
understand. Thus it presents a challenge.

The author of Hebrews imagines Jesus quoting
Psalm 39/40. The ideas here are quite familiar
from the writings of the prophets: what God wants
is not ritual and sacrifices, but rather a contrite
heart, a life well-lived. *God, here I am; I come to
do your will.*

This points to the meaning of the incarnation and
of the sending of Christ into the world. The child
born for us will be our saviour by the ultimate
offering he will make on the cross.

The reader should adopt an analytical,
explanatory style to try to make this text clear.
The psalm falls into two parts: the first about 'no
sacrifice' and the second about doing God's will.
There is an exact parallel in the second section of
the reading. First, the setting-aside of sacrifice,
and then, quoting the psalm, an affirmation of
Christ's holy offering of himself. As the writer
explains: Christ abolishes the first to replace it
with the second.

Study the text and practise reading it.

Gospel

Christmas is a time for visiting family. Mary's visit
to her older cousin, Elizabeth, lets us reflect on our
own experience of visiting one another at this time
of year.

The expectant mother is the strongest symbol of
the Advent season. Advent themes of waiting in
hope and excitement at a forthcoming birth are
beautifully expressed in this story of the two
pregnant women who meet.

The reader should also be filled with the Holy
Spirit, and proclaim the text with joyous
exclamation, awe and wonder at the mystery
being revealed. As the people hear the familiar
words, *blessed is the fruit of your womb*, we want
them too to exclaim, *it is the Lord!* and to leap with
joy.

The reading ends in a reflective tone: *blessed is
she who believed that the promise of the Lord would
be fulfilled.*

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)

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.

FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT

FIRST READING (NRSV)

A reading from the book of the prophet Micah 5:2–5

The Lord says to his people:
“You, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah,
who are one of the little clans of Judea,
from you shall come forth for me
one who is to rule in Israel,
whose origin is from of old, from ancient days.”

Therefore he shall give them up until the time
when she who is in labour has brought forth;
then the rest of his kindred
shall return to the people of Israel.
And he shall stand and feed his flock
in the strength of the Lord,
in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God.

And they shall live secure,
for now he shall be great to the ends of the earth;
and he shall be the one of peace.

RESPONSORIAL PSALM (NRSV)

Psalm 80.1ab+2, 14-15, 17-18 (R.3)

R. Lord, make us turn to you;
let us see your face and we shall be saved.

Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel,
you who are enthroned upon the cherubim, shine forth.
Stir up your might,
and come to save us. **R.**

Turn again, O God of hosts,
look down from heaven and see;
have regard for this vine,
the stock that your right hand has planted. **R.**

But let your hand be upon the one at your right,
the one whom you have made strong for yourself.
Then we will never turn back from you;
give us life, and we will call on your name. **R.**

SECOND READING (NRSV)

A reading from the letter to the Hebrews 10:5–10

When Christ came into the world, he said,
“Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired,
but a body you have prepared for me;
in burnt offerings and sin offerings
you have taken no pleasure.
Then I said,
as it is written of me in the scroll of the book,
‘See, God, I have come to do your will, O God.’”

When Christ said,
“You have neither desired nor taken pleasure
in sacrifices and offerings
and burnt offerings and sin offerings”
(these are offered according to the law),
then he added,
“See, I have come to do your will.”
He abolishes the first
in order to establish the second.

And it is by God’s will that we have been sanctified
through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ
once for all.

GOSPEL (NRSV)

A reading from the gospel according to Luke 1:39–45

Mary set out and went with haste
to a Judean town in the hill country,
where she entered the house of Zechariah
and greeted Elizabeth.

When Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting,
the child leaped in her womb.
And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit
and exclaimed with a loud cry,
“Blessed are you among women,
and blessed is the fruit of your womb.
And why has this happened to me,
that the mother of my Lord comes to me?
For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting
the child in my womb leaped for joy.
And blessed is she who believed
that there would be a fulfilment
of what was spoken to her by the Lord.”