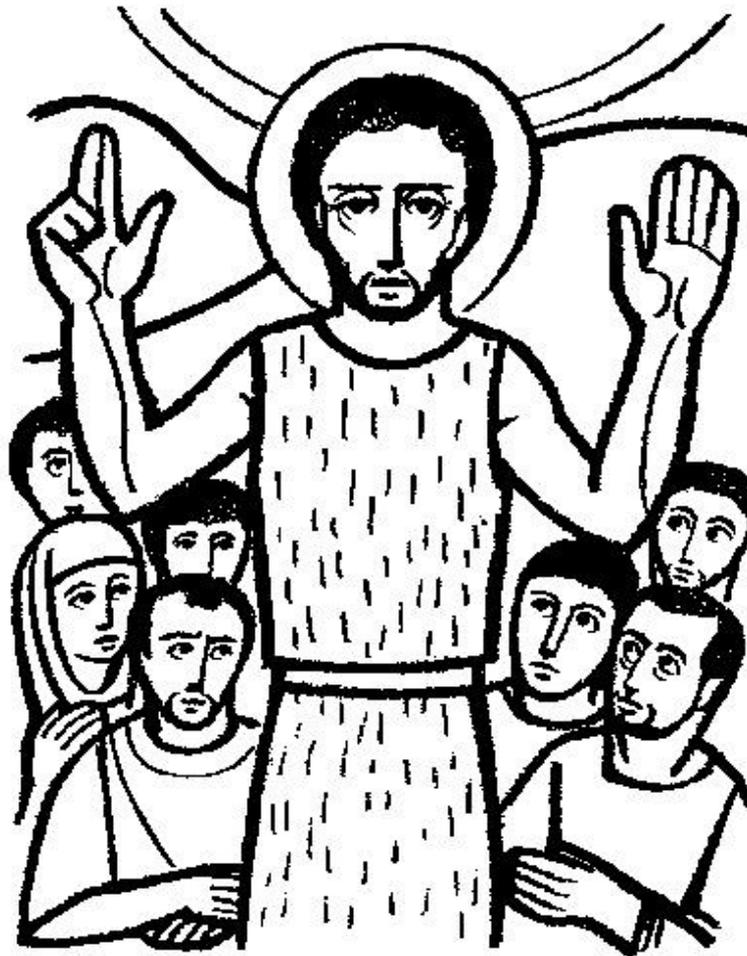


# Sunday Readings

## the Year of Luke



John went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. (Luke 3:3)

**3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday in Advent**  
Sunday 16<sup>th</sup> December 2018

**notes**

1. The biblical excerpts are drawn from the New Oxford Annotated Bible, New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), published by Oxford University Press (1994).

2. **Cover image:** 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Advent Year C – image from the Missionaries of Sacred Heart - Peru.

3. **Lectio Divina:** reading GOD's WORD in a moment of prayer and allowing it to enlighten and renew us:

*"In the presence of GOD, during a recollected reading of the text, it is good to ask, for example: 'LORD, what does this text say to me? What is it about my life that you want to change by this text? What troubles me about this text? Why am I not interested in this?' Or perhaps: 'What do I find pleasant in this text? What is it about this Word that moves me? What attracts me? Why does it attract me?'"*<sup>1</sup>

The practise of *lectio divina* requires a quiet space, a passage of scripture and the willingness to give time to the project. The passage used should be short. For the purpose of this booklet, we suggest using the gospel reading of the up-coming Sunday.

There are four steps in the traditional practise of *lectio divina*. The steps don't have to have the following order:

*lectio (reading)* – read the passage of Scripture read slowly - more than once. If a particular word, phrase, or sentence seems significant (even if you don't know why) you may want to write it down.

*meditatio (reflection)* – let the significant words fill your mind without straining to analyse them. We are in GOD's presence and so let the Holy Spirit lead your understanding of the words.

*oratio (prayer)* – allow your heart to speak to GOD, in words inspired by the passage of Scripture, or by the thoughts that have come to you, while reflecting on it.

*contemplatio (rest)* – let go of ideas and words and allow yourself to rest in the presence of GOD, in simple and wordless contemplation.

This booklet gives the context and some commentary on each of the readings and the psalm used in the Sunday's liturgy. Familiarity with the texts and the commentary beforehand, can better prepare our hearing and understanding the passages in our worship. Whatever our preparation for doing this exercise and whatever questions we may use to break open the passage, we must be conscious of Christ's promise: *'Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them'*.<sup>2</sup>

4. **Review of the Week** – at the end of each reflection the review examines one of the themes of the readings, usually drawn from the gospel, and provides an opportunity to check our own performance, in the light of the Word and Eucharist that we have previously heard and experienced.

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1 From paragraph 153 *The Joy of the Gospel* (Evangelii Gaudium) – Pope Francis (2013)

2 *Mt.18:20*

## 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Advent

16<sup>th</sup> December 2018

### ***be joyful and act fairly – the Holy One is near***

#### ***introduction***

The nearness of GOD is our reason for joy. The joy spoken of in today's liturgy is delight in the passionate anticipation of what has not yet arrived. But something special is disclosed to us. The readings announce a fundamental transformation of reality. This is the reason for our joy. We are at the very centre of the Christian gospel. Joy is tied to a generous and wise heart. The season of Advent prepares for the coming of *The One* who has such a heart. When the crowds speculate as to whether John the Baptist may be *The One (the Messiah)* the forerunner responds, that whereas he baptises with water, *the coming 'stronger one'* will baptise, "*with the Holy Spirit and with fire!*". Baptism with fire, seems to point to a demanding, purifying judgement. But as the Gospel will make clear, any judging role that Jesus may exercise, will take place in the indefinite future, following '*the day of acceptance*'.<sup>3</sup> That's the central focus of the Baptist's mission. The "*baptism of the Spirit*" that the disciples are to receive at Pentecost, will involve the appearance of tongues, "*as of fire*".<sup>4</sup> But this will not be a moment of judgement. The Spirit will empower the disciples to take up the mission of Jesus and proclaim the, '*day of acceptance*' to the ends of the Earth.

#### ***first reading: Zephaniah 3 : 14 – 18***

**[ A song of joy ]**

*Sing aloud, O daughter Zion; shout, O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter Jerusalem!(14) The LORD has taken away the judgments against you, he has turned away your enemies. The king of Israel, the LORD, is in your midst; you shall fear disaster no more.(15) On that day it shall be said to Jerusalem: Do not fear, O Zion; do not let your hands grow weak.(16) The LORD, your GOD, is in your midst, a warrior who gives victory; he will rejoice over you with gladness, he will renew you in his love; he will exult over you with loud singing(17) as on a day of festival. I will remove disaster from you, so that you will not bear reproach for it.(18)*

Zephaniah opens with a series of condemnations directed against the managers of Jerusalem and other nations. They are guilty of inequitous behaviour (Cf. *Zp. Chs.1-3*). The city of Jerusalem boasts of its self-sufficiency (Cf. *Zp.2:15*). But the city's proud managers don't recognise any outside agency. The city fails to

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3 Lk.4:19,21

4 Cf. Ac.2:3

attribute it's good life and security, to the power of GOD, in what GOD has created. In place of a respectful attitude towards the LORD, a pragmatic ideology has taken as absolute, any structure or mechanism that seems to work. To confront such attitudes, the prophet declares distress and doom as the inevitable outcome of such a self-sufficient ideology.

But starting in *chapter 3*, the prophet's tone changes.<sup>5</sup> The holy One will mobilise and act decisively against the proud and mighty (v.9). The city will be liberated and its old failed managers will be replaced by, "*a humble and lowly people*", who seek, "*refuge in the name of the LORD*" and will, "*do no wrong and tell no lies*" (vv.11-13). A body of humble ones, who take steps to reform themselves morally and religiously, will be the agents of a renewed and secure Jerusalem, after the terrible judgement "*Day of the LORD*".

A poem about the shape of the liberated city follows. The oppressors are defeated; alienation is ended; and the LORD's return is possible. The fundamental hope in the Israelite tradition, is about a new covenant relationship with the LORD, in which all will know *the Torah (Law of Moses)* and be forgiven. Now the prophet declares that the people of Jerusalem can sing and shout because the LORD promises just such a relationship, and all GOD's judgements against the failed city and its managers, have been set aside. The prophet provides a vision for people who presently live under oppression and poverty. The prophet is convinced that the world will surely become the world that the LORD intends. In other places in the Scriptures, that hope is expressed as natural enemies making peace; i.e., lions and lambs lying down together,<sup>6</sup> and a new shepherd or ruler will, '*do justice*'.<sup>7</sup>

Israelite hope and the LORD's promise, concern a transformed world. This hope and promise anticipates a sharp change of fortune: from fear to freedom; from defeat at the hands of an oppressor, to repossession of one's own land and city. The prophet states that hope in terms of a people who are no longer under GOD's negative judgement, which was characterised by the holy One's absence from the holy City. With this turn-around, Jerusalem has real reason to rejoice. This change is cause for festivities in dance and song. Those who were oppressed and enslaved by debt, have their debt lifted. There is a general amnesty. Dreams of freedom will not be silenced by totalitarianism. Dreams of justice will come to fruition in spite of unfair public institutions. The world is transformable – and it will be transformed!<sup>8</sup>

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5 *Zp.3:8ff*

6 *Is.11:6-9*

7 *Ezk.34:11-16*

8 The claim is not a reasonable one. We will never be reasonably persuaded about such an astonishing claim. It can only be proclaimed – it cannot be argued. That's the stance of the prophet. We, like the people of Jerusalem, have to first free our imagination, so that another way of thinking, seeing and knowing, can be practised in our world. In the restored city, the LORD's reigning displaces aggressive

**response: Psalm = Isaiah 12 : 2 – 6****[ Thanksgiving and praise ]**

*Surely GOD is my salvation; I will trust, and will not be afraid, for the LORD GOD is my strength and my might; he has become my salvation. (2) With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation.(3) And you will say in that day: Give thanks to the LORD, call on his name; make known his deeds among the nations; proclaim that his name is exalted.(4) Sing praises to the LORD, for he has done gloriously; let this be known in all the earth.(5) Shout aloud and sing for joy, O royal Zion, for great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel.(6)*

The speaker hints of newness and affirms trust in the LORD's salvation.<sup>9</sup> The prophetic word is positive. There is thanksgiving, joy and praise (vv.4-6). It's the LORD's *power-for-life*, or *grace*, which will be the gift to the City. This glowing picture of the future, serves to expose *the power for death* of the present order and the failure of the present managers. The future promises serve to work against and subvert the present power arrangements; to delegitimize their claims and to dismiss their credibility.

The speaker celebrates a new, powerful orientation to life. The reason for celebrating is that there will be a new city, a new community and a new faithfulness. The holy GOD will not quit until such newness is brought about. The speaker hints of newness and affirms trust in the LORD's salvation. *Verses 4-6* is a song of thanksgiving, joy and praise. This word of promise exposes the failures of the present management.

**second reading: Philippians 4 : 4 – 7****[ Exhortations ]**

*Rejoice in the LORD always; again I will say, Rejoice.(4) Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The LORD is near.(5) Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to GOD.(6) And the peace of GOD, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.(7)*

For the true disciple of Christ, rejoicing is an expression of selflessness. "Rejoicing in the LORD" (v.4) is an attitude derived from the holy One's nearness.<sup>10</sup> Paul's words to the *Philippians*, breathe a similar confidence to that expressed in *Zephaniah*. Because, "the LORD is near" this expectation has shaped the faith and

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restlessness. People will be secure because there is no cause for anxious greediness. All will share and there will be enough for all. Such a hopeful vision is a deep threat to the way the present world is organized. The changes towards a new City and the new world that seems so threatening – are in fact a movement towards a new world that liberates.

<sup>9</sup> *Is.12:1-6* – Israel's thanksgiving to the LORD, expressed in language like that of *the Psalms*.

<sup>10</sup> *Ph.4:1-9* This series of ethical admonitions rests especially on the view of Christ and His coming (cf *Ph.4:5*) in *Ph.3:20-21*. Paul's instructions touch on unity within the congregation, joy, prayer, and the Christian outlook on life.

hope of believers. The community lives on the verge of, or close to, something or someone and the reverse is also true. This fact changes the nature of human experience and exchange. Needs must be recognised and addressed to GOD in prayer (v.6).

True Christian prayer of petition recognises that GOD incarnate in the community, is already hearing the prayer when it is expressed aloud. Such petition should speak gratitude. Acknowledging that prayer is answered doesn't fit well with anxiety. In fact, prayer is the way this anxiety is removed, by handing it over to GOD.<sup>11</sup> This peace comes from GOD incarnate. But its source transcends the life of individual Christians. Its an experience that goes beyond human understanding. The passage is permeated with the transforming hope that filled the early Christian community. The reading focuses on the application of the hopefulness and joy the liturgy inspires. The sense of the nearness of GOD's presence shaped the faith and hope of the early Christian believers. Paul's reason for joy is based on his expectation of the final reigning of Jesus.

***gospel reading: Luke 3 : 10 – 18 [ With exhortations John proclaims good news ]***

*And the crowds asked him, "What then should we do?"(10) In reply he said to them, "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise."(11) Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, "Teacher, what should we do?"(12) He said to them, "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you."(13) Soldiers also asked him, "And we, what should we do?" He said to them, "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages."(14) As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah,(15) John answered all of them by saying, "I baptise you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and fire.(16) His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."(17) So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people.(18)*

The crowds that John attracted by his preaching, were satisfied with a mere ritual '*baptism*'. John speaks about creating a society where people are equal. He asks them to change a system where some have a great deal and others have the cards stacked quite differently. The attitude of the wealthy, who have many shirts, houses, lands, cars and factories, must change. Luke uses the Greek word,

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<sup>11</sup> [v.5a] *Gentleness, considerateness, forbearance, fairness.*

'*laos*' (*the people*), to speak about those who heard John's message as a call for real change.

The crowd remained selfish and the Baptist called them, "*dangerous snakes*". Tax-men purchased the right to collect taxes and, in turn, they employed subordinates, to carry out their work. Abuses were common. Like the soldiers, they were hated and despised. John's advice to such classes of people is; "*No stealing! Be simple, fair and just! No self-aggrandisement at another's expense;*" that's "*smoothing the way of the LORD.*"<sup>12</sup> John's preaching emphasises that people are neither to depend on the rules of the Scribes, nor the moralising of the Pharisees. The Pharisees held certain jobs to be degrading. The Baptist upgrades all jobs to the level of human responsibility. No one was to be '*written off*' as beyond changing their attitude.

When Jesus comes he repeats in various ways, much of what John says. But Luke will clarify the distance between John and Jesus. According to Jeremiah, the LORD is the powerful One, who redeems the people (*Jr.50:34*). Luke wants this message of John about '*the more powerful One*' to refer to Jesus. John washes with water. The '*more powerful One*' washes with, "*the holy Spirit and with fire*" (*v.16*).<sup>13</sup> In *the Book of Acts*, Luke applies the words of the prophet *Joel* to the Pentecost event. *Joel's* is an apocalyptic text that promises an out-pouring of, '*the Spirit and fire*'.<sup>14</sup> Luke anticipates the more powerful practise of Jesus, as he describes the Baptist's practise. The role of Jesus is already part of Christian history at the time Luke wrote. Pentecost, while not the end of that history, is the climax of the practise of '*the more powerful One*', who accelerates the outpouring of *the LORD's power-for-life* and *newness*. Instead of sending '*fire*' to instantly demolish the opposition, Jesus will accomplish the sorting out of the people, through '*giving the Spirit*'. Those who rely on meaningless rites, will come around to the understanding that these things must be put aside as worthless!

For Luke, Jesus is *the Messiah*. He is *the Messiah of the holy GOD*, who comes without impressive signs. What the Baptist speaks of as future, becomes a reality in Jesus' presence and later at Pentecost. John's social message was "*good news*" and his words were part of the pattern of the new age that was coming into being. Tax collectors and soldiers could be included in, "*smoothing the LORD's path*" without the crooked ways of fussy Scribes, or narrow-minded Pharisee moralists. This was revolutionary thinking. '*The crowd*' heard bad news. '*The*

12 Later a tax collector, Zacchaeus, will volunteer such an attitude without having to be told (cf. *Lk.19:8*).

13 [*v.16*] *He will baptise you with the holy Spirit and fire*: - from the point of view of the early Christian community, *the Spirit* and *fire* must have been understood in the light of the fire symbolism of the pouring out of *the Spirit at Pentecost* (*Ac.2:1-4*); but as part of John's preaching, the *Spirit* and *fire* should be related to their purifying and refining characteristics (cf. *Ezk.36:25-27*; & *Ml.3:2-3*).

14 *Jl.3:1-5*

people' heard *the Good News*. The way a person heard the message of John and changed, made the difference. It will be the same when '*the more powerful One*' comes with the same message.

### **items for sharing:**

- *Can we rejoice at a triumph of the future, if we have haven't lived through such liberation in our past? **Comment on Zephaniah 3 : 14 - 18***
- *The attitude of hope characterises Christian prayer. **Comment on Philippians 4 : 4 - 7***
- *Preparation for Christ's coming affects our responsibilities in life. **Comment on Luke 3 : 10 - 14***

### **Prayer**

*Almighty GOD,  
 you sent your Son into a world  
 where the wheat must be winnowed from the chaff  
 and evil clings even to what is good.  
 Let the fire of your Spirit  
 purge us of greed and deceit,  
 so that, purified, we may find our peace in you  
 and you may delight in us.  
 Grant this through him whose coming is certain,  
 whose day draws near:  
 your Son, our LORD Jesus Christ,  
 who lives and reigns with you  
 in the unity of the Holy Spirit,  
 GOD for ever and ever. **Amen.***

### **Review of the Week**

*Joy is tied to a generous and wise heart. The season of Advent prepares us for the coming of The One who has such a heart. We rejoice that the Holy One is near. And we pray that our good sense be obvious to all, because the Restorer of the bored, the distracted, and the fatigued, can remove the things that hinder us from being people of joy. We are not to be slaves to the sadness of our old world, because the GOD of Moses, the GOD of the prophets, and the GOD of John the Baptist, helps us to be fair and to avoid any of our remaining survival-of-the-fittest attitudes. We are to share with those who lack, so we can hear the prophets' words of promise and be open to GOD's Holy Spirit, to act to dismantle injustice.*

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