

Sunday Readings

the Year of Luke



*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”.*
(Lk. 1: 41 - 42)

4th Sunday in Advent
Sunday 23rd 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:** 4th 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?'"*¹

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'*.²

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.

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

2 *Mt.18:20*

4th Sunday of Advent

23rd December 2018

the visitation

introduction

In today's gospel, a messenger from GOD congratulates a young woman named Mary. She was to be favoured by GOD. The prophets had often congratulated the Israelite people under the name, "*Daughter of Zion*", because it was from the Israelites that the Messiah would be born. The focus of the prophetic word, shifts from a return of GOD's presence in *Zion (Jerusalem)* to *the Daughter of Zion; Mary*, who hosts the child of GOD's promise.

first reading: Micah 5 : 1 – 4

[**The Ruler from Bethlehem**]

But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days.(2) 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. (3) 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;(4) and he shall be the one of peace.(5)

The prophet Micah speaks about a future ruler, who will come from *Bethlehem Ephrathah*.³ Micah's prophesying about the destiny of Jerusalem was remembered by the elders in Jeremiah's time.⁴ They cited Micah's condemnations as a precedent in defence of Jeremiah's similar audacious prophesying. The prophecies about a restored and glorified Zion, are out-of-step with his position stated earlier. The prophet's words become the catalyst for more hopeful prophecies about the holy city. Jerusalem, or Mt. Zion, will become the centre for a purified Israelite people and as an assembly point for the other nations. The "*swords into plowshares*" prophesy (cf. *Mi.4:1-3*) is identical with Isaiah (see *Is.2:2-4*) except for an additional note that reveals Micah's origins in tribal Yahwism:

*But each man will sit under his vine and fig tree
with no one to trouble him. (Mi.4:4 NJB)*

3 *Micah* is an eighth century prophet and contemporary of *Isaiah*. He confidently exposes the public sins that are destroying the Israelites, starting with an attack on Samaria and Jerusalem – the centres for institutionlised violence against defenceless, small-town people – and then he speaks about an invasion – maybe by Sennacherib in 701 – that reaches to the very gates of Jerusalem.

[v.3] *She who is in labour has brought forth* – that is, the mother of the Messiah; cf *Is.7:14*.

4 *Jr.26:16-19*

To be satisfied with one vine and one fig tree is not very much. The prophet shrewdly asserts that there will not be disarmament (i.e. beating swords into ploughshares) until there is a lowered standard of living.⁵ In Micah's time Jerusalem is still under siege (*Mi.4:14*). Later the tide against Jerusalem will turn and the tone of prophesying becomes more favourable (*Mi.5:1ff*) and acceptable worship is possible:

*YHWH has told you, O mortal, what is good;
and what does the LORD require of you
but to do justice, and to love kindness,
and to walk humbly with your GOD! (Mi.6:8 NRSV)*

The new One that the LORD GOD will send, will be born not in Jerusalem, but in David's town. The poetry provides an ironic contrast between the City of Jerusalem, where everything supposedly important happens and the village of Bethlehem, where history is never made. Bethlehem's insignificance heightens GOD's choice of it, to achieve something new. Unimpressive appearances on the human level, are signs of the divine presence.

response: Psalm 80(79) : 1 – 7

[Prayer for Israel's restoration]

*Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel,
you who lead Joseph like a flock!
You who are enthroned upon the cherubim,
shine forth(1)
before Ephraim and Benjamin and Manasseh.
Stir up your might, and come to save us!(2)
Restore us, O GOD; let your face shine,
that we may be saved.(3)
O LORD GOD of hosts,
how long will you be angry
with your people's prayers?(4)
You have fed them with the bread of tears,
and given them tears to drink in full measure.(5)
You make us the scorn of our neighbours;
our enemies laugh among themselves.(6)
Restore us, O GOD of hosts;
let your face shine, that we may be saved.(7)*

The psalm is a community lament probably at the time of an enemy invasion. With our our thoughts oriented towards Christmas, the speaker voices an

⁵ It takes a lowered standard of living to be satisfied with **one** vine and **one** fig tree! It would mark the end of rapaciousness, the reduction of taxes, and the peoples' satisfaction with having enough. Isaiah, who moved about the CBD of Jerusalem, omits this detail!

appropriate yearning for the coming of GOD – who has the power to save us and deliver the promise of a better world and pleads on behalf of the troubled community, who are no strangers to the LORD. These people have had a long history of trustful interaction (v.1). The speaker recalls the LORD's goodness in earlier times. That's the reason to hope for the LORD's goodness now. Arguing that any loss in death, will not be the speaker's, but the LORD's! The speaker dares to suggest that the LORD will be seen by outsiders as unable to protect *the vine* the LORD's own hand has planted.

The need is lodged at GOD's throne, so that it is clear that it's the LORD's problem about which GOD must act. Life may be disoriented, but in their troubles the Israelites are clear about the place where the problem may be laid. The LORD is treated as the responsible governing One, when all conventional government has collapsed.

second reading: Hebrews 10:5 – 10

[Christ's sacrifice once-for-all]

Consequently, when Christ came into the world, he said, "Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired, but a body you have prepared for me;(5) in burnt offerings and sin offerings you have taken no pleasure."(6) Then I said, 'See, GOD, I have come to do your will, O GOD' (in the scroll of the book it is written of me)."(7) When he said above, "You have neither desired nor taken pleasure in sacrifices and offerings and burnt offerings and sin offerings" (these are offered according to the law),(8) then he added, "See, I have come to do your will." He abolishes the first in order to establish the second.(9) And it is by GOD's will that we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.(10)

The author links Jesus' blood with the covenant, seeing Jesus' death as the way of obtaining the necessary blood with which to establish a new covenant to replace the covenant of Moses. Blood was necessary for consecrating the persons and things which were bound to GOD in the first covenant. The blood of Jesus had to be poured out to consecrate the new covenant.⁶ For the first covenant, blood was sprinkled as a sign to, "*restore their bodily purity*" (Hb.9:13). Now, the sacramental '*blood*' of Jesus is drunk as a sign that it "*can purify* (a disciple's) *conscience from dead actions*" (Hb.9:14).

Jesus' role, according to the writer, is his perfect obedience to GOD – not his making sacrifices and offerings. Jesus has abolished the first covenant and established the second, "*by His blood.*" The Torah commanded that sacrifices be

⁶ See Hb.9:19-23. *Sacrifices and offerings and burnt offerings and sin offerings*: [v.8] – these terms taken from Ps.40 are probably intended as equivalents to the principal types of O.T. sacrifices: *peace offerings* (Lv.3, here called *sacrifices*); *cereal offerings* (Lv.2, here called *offerings*); *holocausts* (Lv.1); and *sin offerings* (Lv.4-5).

offered. In the writer's judgement the old covenant was out-dated and almost gone (cf. *Ps.40*). The "*body of Jesus*" was given as a sacrifice to replace the Aaronic sacrifice and offering. Jesus' coming into the world, firstly replaces the Torah (v.8). '*Made holy*' (v.10) means cleansed from sin or ritual impurity. The author used the word '*complete*', or '*once-for-all*', to describe the new condition of a disciple for whom atonement had been made through sacrifice. He seems to mean, "*made perfect*", because those who "*are being made holy*", are those who receive the benefits of Christ's sacrifice.

'*Body*' in Hebrew means the entire person. The obedience of Christ is the means by which disciples of Jesus are made holy. The mystery of the birth at Bethlehem looks forward to the "*offering of the body of Jesus Christ once-for-all*" (v.10). The writer doesn't speak about human action and human reparations. The birth at Bethlehem invites the modern disciple to be amazed and grateful for the initiative GOD has taken towards mere mortals.

gospel reading: Luke 1 : 39 – 45

[Mary visits Elizabeth]

In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country,(39) where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth.(40) When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit(41) and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb.(42) And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me?(43) For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy.(44) And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the LORD."(45)

A messenger from GOD (an angel) congratulates Mary because she will be favoured by GOD to give birth to the Messiah. The angel had first announced to Mary that she was to be favoured by GOD. Now Mary greets Elizabeth, who had been barren like Sarah, and Hannah.⁷ Elizabeth was six months pregnant. The child in Elizabeth's womb leapt prophetically and from that Elizabeth, also filled with the holy Spirit, concludes that Mary is, "*to give birth to the LORD*". To be, "*filled with the holy Spirit of GOD*" or "*the Spirit of Love*" is to be associated with the prophets. Luke introduces the beginning of John the Baptist's career as a prophet: "*John will be filled with the holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb*" (cf. *Lk.1:15*). Even in the womb, John '*goes before the LORD*', to announce his coming.

Elizabeth greets Mary as, "*the mother of my LORD*," rather than any mention of Jesus as Messiah. Elizabeth utters a double blessing over Mary. Mary is blessed

⁷ For Sarah see *Gn.18:4* – and for Hannah, see 1 S.2.

among women because of the fruit of her womb. She is blessed because of her faith. Elizabeth praises Mary's motherhood – but above all – she praises her faith. This seems to be a variation on a general theme that whenever someone says something about Jesus' mother, Jesus will respond by shifting the emphasis from physical maternity to – hearing the WORD (of GOD) and doing or keeping it.⁸

The WORD which Mary accepted (v.38), involved a virginal conception. So it required faith. The conception of the child in her womb which made her blessed among women, was entirely through GOD's creative Spirit, without any physical participation by humankind. Mary brought her faith to GOD's plan of salvation, that the creator GOD could accomplish this.⁹ Luke in this visitation scene recognises Mary's child as, "*the LORD*" and Mary as, "*the mother of the LORD*" - a believer, a model of faith. Luke's gospel picks up the lowly servant theme (Lk.1:38) and makes Mary a disciple from the beginning of his account.

Joy in the good news is central to the message. There is excitement and confidence in GOD's intervention in human history. Elisabeth is filled with *the Spirit of GOD – the holy Spirit*. For here it introduces a prophetic role. This was the reason for the ending of her barrenness. In Mary, "*the coming of the holy Spirit*" and "*the overshadowing of the Most High*", produces the Messiah.

items for sharing:

- *As disciples of Jesus, we prepare for Christ's coming: our hope ultimately placed in GOD rather than in our own efforts. **Comment on Micah 5 : 2 – 5***
- *The difference Christ's coming will make to us? **Comment on Hebrews 10 : 5 – 10***
- *As with the Baptist, Christ comes to us not we to him; we have but to respond. **Comment on Luke 1 : 39 – 45***

prayer:

*Who are we, LORD GOD,
that you should come to us?
Yet you have visited your people
and redeemed us in your Son.
As we prepare to celebrate his birth,
make our hearts leap for joy
at the sound of your Word,
and move us by your Spirit
to bless your wonderful works.*

⁸ Cf. Lk.11:28

⁹ This faith in the fulfillment of GOD's WORD, is worthy of a blessing. It stands in contrast to the lack of faith of Elizabeth's husband. He didn't believe. However GOD's WORD would still be fulfilled.

*We ask 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:

We don't need to engage in speculation about ways, or modes, or times. Its enough to ponder the claim of the reigning of GOD expressed in Mary's song; that it will displace present power arrangements. That's why we celebrate in anticipation. Our anticipation of the 'coming of the LORD Jesus', takes its substance from the memory of the historical Jesus: *'The blind see again, the lame walk, those suffering from virulent skin-diseases are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised to life, the good news is proclaimed to the poor.'* (cf. Lk.7:22 NJB).

The transformation to be celebrated is known to be the work of GOD's resilient Spirit. The work of the Spirit is evident in *Micah* where the Spirit authorises the speaker to voice an future where newness replaces everything that is hopeless. In the In *Hebrews* the reference to the Spirit is indirect. But taking the entire letter it is GOD's Spirit that empowers the new community. In *Luke*, the new action is attributed to the work of the Spirit. All these texts speak of the resilient, free, power of GOD to work an utter newness in a world which seemed closed.

-----oooOooo-----