

Sunday Readings

the Year of Luke



*The Word became flesh and lived among us,
and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a
father's only son, full of grace and truth. (Jn.1:14)*

Christmas Day
Sunday 25th 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:** Nativity of Jesus Christ with his Mother and St. Joseph, and the Theotokos Icon – written by Munir Alawi (June 2018).

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*

Christmas – Mass of the Day

25th December 2018

in the WORD was life

introduction

Now is a time for expressing our gratitude for life in all its variety. It is a time to celebrate newness and innocence and children. And especially to celebrate GOD's own child – the Promise of what is yet to be; the beginning of the reigning of GOD on Earth - the eternal *power-for-life* expressed in identity with our flesh and our being raised up. The LORD dwells with us - literally, "*GOD pitches a tent in our midst*".³ That is the great dignity and beauty the GOD of creation gifts us – an enduring power for new life. We ponder this mysterious, subversive power for life and newness, revealed in Nature's own extravagant summer energy and strength, and in the liturgical texts about the birth of *the Child of Promise*

first reading: Isaiah 52 : 7 – 10

[Let Zion rejoice]

How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces peace, who brings good news, who announces salvation, who says to Zion, "Your GOD reigns."(7) Listen! Your sentinels lift up their voices, together they sing for joy; for in plain sight they see the return of the LORD to Zion.(8) Break forth together into singing, you ruins of Jerusalem; for the LORD has comforted his people, he has redeemed Jerusalem.(9) The LORD has bared his holy arm before the eyes of all the nations; and all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our GOD.(10)

The messenger announces that GOD's power works to end exile and to allow the Israelites to return home. The news is that the Babylonian empire and god had been defeated. The Babylonian Empire had seemed so permanent. The Babylonian god had seemed so powerful. The watchmen in the ruined city are overjoyed at the news (v.8). For them the messenger's return is as if GOD returns to the city to console it's inhabitants and redeem their past failures at covenant-keeping.

Isaiah expresses gladness for the ending of the empire. The Babylonian Empire wasn't able to deliver what it promised (vv.9-10). When the messenger affirms, "*Your GOD is king!*"(v.7) it restates Israelite belief that YHWH GOD is *the true power-for-life*. The turn of events in Babylon confirms it. The watchmen had been the acting guardians of Jerusalem's ruins since its 587 destruction. They discern by the manner of the messenger's approach that the news is good – and

³ See Jn.1:14a in today's reading.

they anticipate victory. They are overjoyed that it means the re-establishing of the LORD's reigning and a renewed city.

The LORD has proved powerful against the deadly power of the Babylonians so there is real hope and renewed promises of freedom for an alternative life for the LORD's people. The defeat of the Empire means exiles are free to leave the confining world of Babylon, and return to their proper place, to be what they were destined to be (v.11).

response: Psalm 98(97) : 1 – 6

[Praise the Judge of the world]

*O sing to the LORD a new song,
for he has done marvelous things.
His right hand and his holy arm
have gotten him victory.(1)
The LORD has made known his victory;
he has revealed his vindication
in the sight of the nations.(2)
He has remembered his steadfast love
and faithfulness to the house of Israel.
All the ends of the earth
have seen the victory of our GOD.(3)
Make a joyful noise to the LORD, all the earth;
break forth into joyous song and sing praises.(4)
Sing praises to the LORD with the lyre,
with the lyre and the sound of melody.(5)
With trumpets and the sound of the horn
make a joyful noise before the King, the LORD.(6)*

The new song of praise befits the new reality. The occasion for the victory song is the telling of a story of a people's move from exile to settlement in the land of promise. The reasons for the new song are fixed in Israelite memory. YHWH GOD is the *power-for-life* and that power comes through GOD's righteousness, steadfast love and faithfulness. The qualities are the central characteristics of the covenant tradition.⁴ The Earth is an impressed spectator(v.3). The rest of the psalm is a call to praise (vv.4-6). The call is out to, "all the Earth". The establishment of the LORD's rule and saving power makes widespread rejoicing possible. The rejoicing expresses confidence that the world will be turned in a fresh direction. Like it was for exiles hearing Isaiah's message,⁵ returning is a demanding business. The old home no longer exists as they knew it. The good news requires and permits going home to a new home.

4 Cf. Jr.9:24

5 Is.52:11

second reading: Hebrews 1 : 1 – 6**[GOD has spoken by his Son –
superior to angels]**

Long ago GOD spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets,(1) but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds.(2) He is the reflection of GOD's glory and the exact imprint of GOD's very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word. When he had made purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high,(3) having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs.(4) For to which of the angels did GOD ever say, "You are my Son; today I have begotten you"? Or again, "I will be his Father, and he will be my Son"? (5) And again, when he brings the first-born into the world, he says, "Let all GOD's angels worship him." (6)

The author focuses on Jesus as the embodiment of Christian hope. Jesus is heir of all the promises of GOD in the Scriptures (v.2). The Son reflects the creativity and glory of GOD and bears the very stamp of GOD's Nature (v.3). The birth celebrated, is the enfleshment of none other than GOD. This birth marks a decisive turn in the shape of creation. *The Agent of creation* has now come as part of creation! While part of creation, Jesus is superior to the angels (v.4). Angels are agents of GOD, gifts of GOD given for human well-being, who are faithful to GOD's purpose, but far enough removed from GOD that they are never reckoned as capable of giving salvation. GOD bestows them as gifts that are welcome, but not sufficient.

The author takes pains to make a distinction between Jesus and any other would-be sources of salvation. Jesus alone is sufficient. All would-be alternatives eventually become idols. The claim of the distinctiveness of Jesus will be offensive to some of a tolerant liberal faith. But if rightly understood, the distinctive claim for Jesus may be equally an affront to comfortable conservatives, who easily mouth faith in Jesus, but tend not to take Jesus singularly, but along with prosperity, certitude, and moral self-satisfaction.

gospel reading: John 1 : 1 – 18**[The WORD became flesh]**

In the beginning was the WORD, and the WORD was with GOD, and the WORD was GOD.(1) He was in the beginning with GOD.(2) All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being(3) in him was life, and the life was the light of all people.(4) The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.(5) There was a man sent from GOD, whose name was John.(6) He came as a witness to testify to the

light, so that all might believe through him.(7) He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light.(8) The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.(9) He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him.(10) He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him.(11) But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of GOD,(12) who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of GOD.(13) And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.(14) [John testified to him and cried out, "This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me.'"(15)], From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace.(16) The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.(17) No one has ever seen GOD. It is the LORD, the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known.(18)

The gospel writer call Jesus '*The WORD*' or expression of GOD (v.1). GOD denounces injustice and all the powers that offer no-life! And GOD announces life in the person of Jesus. It is the announcement of a profound change in society. Throughout the Hebrew scriptures God has been denouncing injustices and announcing a just society. This denouncing and announcing was God's Word.

Now the '*WORD*' comes in a flesh and blood person – Jesus. By using the phrase "*in the beginning*", John wanted to tell a story of a new creation, like the story in *Genesis*. GOD created the world by means of '*the WORD*' – the sky (heavens) the Earth, the waters, the animals. Creating and speaking are ways of communicating. In creating, a person makes something known – like composing a poem, or a song. Artists and workers are known through their '*creations*'. When GOD created light, stars, the heavens and the Earth, GOD was communicating. The Greek word the Bible uses to speak of creation is, *poema*. The world is GOD's poem.

GOD said, "*Let there be light*" and there was light.⁶ The creative, communicative act of GOD was life-giving. This *power-for-life* moves from GOD (in whom there is no place for darkness to overshadow the light) to the riskiness of Earth (GOD came among us). The One who was with GOD came among us. What is new is this invasion from out beyond us – from '*the heart of the throne of GOD*'. The text of John expresses the same dynamic that the passage of Isaiah does.⁷ It

6 *Jn.1:4-5*

7 *Is.52:7-10*

is an announcement of one who comes in power among the ruins of the old world, to make all things new for exiles – for people living in desperate darkness.

But the very people who hoped for new life, rejected the One for whom they hoped. People didn't accept Jesus who came in weakness. The Cross already looms large in the first verses of the gospel. The coming One is not a triumphant One, but an empty One.⁸ Jesus spoke against injustice, or sin, and they were unjust people. Those who produce lies and are selfish and do injustices, are not '*children of GOD*'. Elsewhere in the gospels, Jesus is quoted as calling those who do not welcome him, '*children of the devil*'. Jesus identified the devil with lying and the devil as, "*the father of lies*".

The weak, vulnerable One is the One with real power (v.12). But this power is not the normal power. It is the world rejects because it is the wrong kind. Jesus' true power is not to make things right or prosperous. It is only to let us be who we are created to be – *children of GOD*. And how are we empowered to that? By weakness. We confess that this fragile Jesus has the capacity to transform life. And the whole of John's gospel shows that the One who washes feet is the One who gives life (Jn.13:8). It is the empty One who makes full (Phil. 2:7-8); it is the poor One who makes rich (2 Co.8:9).

The rejected, powerful One comes full of grace and truth (v.14). The words are the Biblical formula for loyalty and reliability – '*hesed*' and '*emeth*'. That is what we celebrate on this day. A new methodology is introduced into our world. The loyalty of GOD in Jesus countermands the handy, easy, throw-away detachment of our society. The faithfulness of GOD contrasts with our daily experience of betrayal. This GOD betrays no one. No wonder the angels sing of the glory (Jn.1:14 & Lk.2:14) and so do we: "*Glory to GOD in the heights*". But it is not the glory of imperial Rome or the expansive bold modern world of the captains of commerce and industry. It is the glory of the rejected One, now known to have power of a new kind.

In Greek the expression is, "*the WORD pitched tent in our midst*"(v.14a). That recalls the Exodus when the Israelites lived in tents. It means that with Jesus, GOD lives in the midst of our camp. GOD became not only human – but weak and vulnerable. First, GOD became '*flesh*' in Jesus, then GOD becomes *flesh* in all who are poor and oppressed in history. The glory of the fleshly One (v.14) is his weakness and vulnerability.

Jesus has the capacity to transform life and after him this same capacity is in all the poor and oppressed. "*The WORD*" today is now the people. The people do the work of GOD's transforming. Jesus, rejected yet powerful comes full of "*grace*

⁸ Our hopes are sure to be disappointed by Jesus if they are shaped by the success syndrome of our society, or that of the Israelite messianic tradition. What was hoped for, is not quite what is received.

and truth". Where there is no truth there is no love. Exploitation is the opposite to truth. Love and truth are the same thing. Here the evangelist says that the Torah (Law) came through Moses but that didn't change the world, because it was only a law or a religious commandment. With Jesus came the real thing – *grace* and *truth*. That is the nature of the 'WORD' that became flesh.

prayer:

*We praise you, gracious GOD,
for the glad tidings of peace,
the good news of salvation:
your WORD became flesh,
and we have seen his glory.
Let the radiance of that glory
enlighten the lives
of those who celebrate his birth.
Reveal to all the world
the light no darkness can extinguish,
our LORD Jesus Christ,
who lives and reigns with you
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
in the splendour of eternal light,
GOD for ever and ever. Amen.*

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