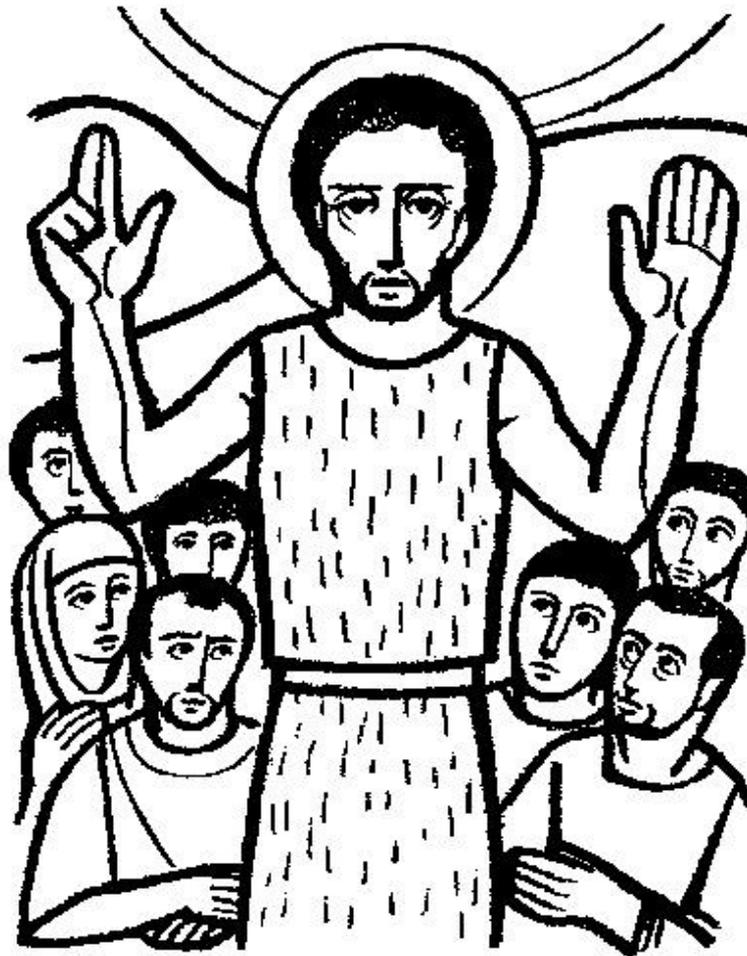


Sunday Readings

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)

2nd Sunday in Advent
Sunday 9th 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:** 2nd 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*

2nd SUNDAY OF ADVENT9th December 2018***prepare 'the Way'; level out injustice******introduction***

Luke describes the Baptist's function as, '*preparing the way*' and '*smoothing out the path*' by his call to action. This invitation is a decisive turning-point in human history. It fulfils and surpasses earlier preparations (or the lack of them) for GOD's reigning. *The One*, more powerful than the Baptist, is about to arrive.³ Echoing the prophets of the exile, Baruch speaks comforting words to a people in trouble; "*YHWH remembers you*". In the gospel, when the fullness of time comes, GOD announces the closeness of the divine reigning. The preaching of John confirms Isaiah's prophecy: "*All will see the salvation of GOD.*"

first reading: Baruch 5: 1 – 9 [hope accompanied Jerusalem's restoration]

Take off the garment of your sorrow and affliction, O Jerusalem, and put on forever the beauty of the glory from GOD.(1) Put on the robe of the righteousness that comes from GOD; put on your head the diadem of the glory of the Everlasting;(2) for GOD will show your splendor everywhere under heaven.(3) For GOD will give you evermore the name, "Righteous Peace, Godly Glory."(4) Arise, O Jerusalem, stand upon the height; look toward the east, and see your children gathered from west and east as the word of the Holy One, rejoicing that GOD has remembered them.(5)

Baruch assumes that the exiled and oppressed people are waiting for the restoration of Jerusalem's fortunes.⁴ The prophet calls the Jerusalem-dwellers to begin to re-imagine their world. The prophet calls them to a destiny that they seem to possess neither the talent nor the capacity to live out. Baruch re-words the tradition, to make the point that any self-sufficient efforts that the people might make to bring about a more secure future, are mis-placed. He affirms that only the LORD has the talent and capacity to restore the elusive peace that they seek. In *the Book of Daniel*, there is an image of *the Human One (Son of man)* being led into the presence of *the One of Great Age* and there receiving sovereignty, glory and power.⁵ The Israelites dream was to live under the LORD's rule in GOD's

3 Luke will chronicle the enormous impact of this *One*, in *the Acts of the Apostles*. By then, he can name the person who comes to complete GOD's reigning.

4 In fact, the people had long before returned from exile. But Baruch finds it important to remember the hope accompanying Jerusalem's restoration for in the meantime the people's fervour for justice and equity had dulled.

5 Cf. *Dn.7:13ff*

holy city. Jerusalem symbolised such a place, where inequality and injustice would have no place:

For they went out from you on foot, led away by their enemies; but GOD will bring them back to you, carried in glory, as on a royal throne.(6) For GOD has ordered that every high mountain and the everlasting hills be made low and the valleys filled up, to make level ground, so that Israel may walk safely in the glory of GOD.(7) The woods and every fragrant tree have shaded Israel at GOD's command. (8) For GOD will lead Israel with joy, in the light of his glory, with the mercy and righteousness that come from him.(9)

A permanent justice and peace in Jerusalem today, had turned out to be as elusive as it was in Baruch's time.⁶ *"The peace of Jerusalem"* stands as a symbol of the elusive peace of GOD's reigning. It is so elusive because of human fickleness. Like Isaiah, Baruch knew the resilience of the old cynical management ways and their resistance to change. Baruch's poetry begins with cosmic claims about the LORD, who controls the high places (*Ba.5:3-5*) and the poetry ends, modelled on *Second Isaiah*. Baruch seeks to inspire the present Jerusalem-dwellers with the same enthusiasm that inspired the first Israelite returnees (cf. *Is.40*); the experience of the LORD's glory in people living lives that are free from inequality and injustice – such was the original experience of living under the LORD's rule in restored Jerusalem. If the LORD's rule wasn't recognisable in Jerusalem, it would hardly be recognisable anywhere else!.

response: Psalm 126(125) : 1 – 6

[A harvest of joy – a song of ascents]

*When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion,
we were like those who dream.(1)
Then our mouth was filled with laughter,
and our tongue with shouts of joy;
then it was said among the nations,
"The LORD has done great things for them."
The LORD has done great things for us,
and we rejoiced.(3)
Restore our fortunes, O LORD,
like the watercourses in the Negeb (4)
May those who sow in tears
reap with shouts of joy.(5)
Those who go out weeping,*

⁶ The prophet would have sympathised with the wistful remark of one of the leaders of the defeated first New Zealand Labour Government (1935-1949): *"they came on foot to vote us in; they drove up in their cars to vote us out!"*

*bearing the seed for sowing,
shall come home with shouts of joy,
carrying their sheaves.(6)*

The speaker uses *Jerusalem (Mt. Zion)* as a metaphor for 'home'. The holy City locates the identity of this people in relation to their GOD. The LORD is an independent agent, with a plan. This plan is the Israelite's only hope as long as they are exiled from the holy places. What is hopeful is that the LORD's plan includes a home-coming and an end of exile. The restored Jerusalem and Temple was an ambivalent sign.⁷ For the psalmist, the holy City continues to hold life together. In exile, the expectation of a restoration of the holy City offers hope. In restoration times, when the people's performance must be guided by the coherence of their special calling by the LORD, the memory of GOD's action preserves them from a worse fragmentation; abandonment; homelessness; and brutal and unjust behaviours.

The turn-about in Israel's fortunes involved every conceivable happiness; moral as well as material (v.6). The idea that rejoicing follows weeping echoes the gospel of John.⁸ *Tears* symbolise death and *shouts of joy* new life. The *shouts of joy* hint at a resurrection which will follow the present sorrow. The transformation is likened to when the winter rains bring to life the desert rivers that have been dry all summer long. The arid Negeb desert to the south of Judah, is transformed with the blossoming of new life. According to the psalmist, GOD's plan is Israel's only hope, as long as they are exiled from the holy places. It is the LORD who brings about homecoming. This hope gives the people a liberating vision towards which they can live. *Where no such vision exists, the people perish.*⁹

second reading: *Philippians 1 : 3 – 6, 8 – 11* [Paul's prayer for the Philippians]

I thank my GOD every time I remember you,(3) constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you,(4) because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now.(5) I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ.(6) . . . For GOD is my witness, how I long for all of you with the compassion of Christ Jesus.(8) And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight(9) to help you to determine what is best, so that in the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless,(10)

7 Whether the performance of the people was healthy or unhealthy; whether true or idolatrous; the sense of a public centre that held the Israelite's imagination together was key to their common cause and values.

8 Cf. *Jn.16:20*

9 *Pr. 29:18*

having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of GOD.(11)

Paul is writing from prison. He speaks of his gratitude for the Philippians. Their faithful performance, in continuing his (Paul's) work of spreading the gospel, gives him both joy and confidence for the future of GOD's new world.¹⁰ They share the good news as they set about resolving the incongruities and contradictions that may too easily be sloughed off by what is about to happen on the day Jesus comes. It is not delight in possessing something but rather the passionate anticipation of something not yet at hand. Although this letter comes from late in Paul's missionary work, his prophecy of *'the day of Jesus Christ'* continued to be an integral part of his message throughout his missionary career. Paul mentions the second coming of Christ frequently.¹¹ *'The day of Jesus Christ'* summaries Paul's hopes about Jesus' imminent return within the daily struggles of believers.¹²

Paul could endure present afflictions because the wait for *'the Son from heaven'* was an essential element in his resurrection faith. For Paul it was a promise capable of realisation in the experience of the Christian community. While waiting for *'the day'*, Paul's prayer is that the Philippian's love will mature (vv.8-11). The apostle's affection for the Philippians has been sharpened by the pain of a long separation. Feelings spill over into prayer for them. The growth in love is channelled into understanding and experience. Such knowledge and discernment are found in the loving practice that Paul commends to the Philippians and which already exists among them. It is based on the gospel message of Jesus. Enriched in this way, Philippian community values will be properly focused.

gospel reading: Luke 3 : 1 – 6¹³

[The proclamation of John the Baptist]

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene,(1) during the high priesthood of Annas and

10 Joy is not the mark of our modern culture. The joy spoken of here by Paul, is the steady assurance he finds in the performance of *the Philippians*.

11 [v.6] *The day of Christ Jesus: The Parousia or triumphant return of Christ*, when those loyal to Him will be with him and share in His eternal glory; cf Ph.1:10; 2:16; 3:20-21; 1 Th.4:17; 5:10; 2 Th.1:10; 1 Co.1:8.

12 The hope for *a Second Coming*, an essential element in early Christian convictions, is based upon the memory of Jesus' own words. It enabled faith to grow amidst trials and adversity.

13 Luke casts the call of John the Baptist in the form of an Old Testament prophetic call (v.2) and extends the quotation from Isaiah found in Mk.1:3 (Is.40:3) by the addition of Is.40:4-5 in Lk.3:5-6. In doing so, he presents his theme of the universality of salvation, which he has announced earlier in the words of Simeon (Lk.2:30-32). In describing the expectation of the people (v.15), Luke is characterising the time of John's preaching in the same way as he had earlier described the situation of other devout Israelites in the infancy narrative (cf Lk.2:25-26, 37-38).

Caiaphas, the word of GOD came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness.(2) He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins,(3) as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah, "The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the LORD, make his paths straight.(4) Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth;(5) and all flesh shall see the salvation of GOD.'"(6)

Luke provides the historical framework of the Baptist's preaching. The action takes place immediately preceding Jesus' public ministry. Luke sets the coming of GOD's Word to John within the context of world history.¹⁴ Tiberius, heads a list of contemporary rulers. The sacred events of Jesus' life and ministry inter-act with the ordinary flow of human affairs. Reference to the wilderness (v.3) anticipates the quotation of Isaiah.¹⁵ The range of John's preaching activity is not narrow. It covers the Jordan River valley. He advises his hearers against adopting a life of isolation like that of *the Essenes*. He proclaims, '*a Baptism of Repentance*' (v.3). '*Washing*' without stressing the water, applies to the experience of repentance – that is – a change of mind and attitude.¹⁶

In the past, the prophets had repeatedly affirmed that the Israelite's sins have separated them from GOD. An about-turn is required (*Is.45:8-9 & Jer.8:6*), usually described by the prophets as, '*a turning back to the LORD*'. Without such a turn-around, the coming of the bearer of liberation (Jesus, the Christ) at the completion of the era won't benefit the Israelites. Luke later describes Jesus as *the One* who offers forgiveness and who voices the message of the true prophet (vv.4-6). Luke, quoting from Isaiah, reaffirms his earlier meaning. There is no mention of ritual washing, but there is an emphasis on moral change. The words describing the preparing the way of the LORD in Isaiah, refer to the Israelite's deliverance from captivity – *a second exodus*. Luke implies that a moral change is necessary if they are to receive GOD's new action in Jesus. In the humble circumstances of Jesus' birth (*Lk.2:12*) and as a sign that is rejected (*Lk.2:24*) is *THE event*. The child in the manger; the child in Simeon's arms; this is the fulfilment of Israel's and the world's hope. John comes in *the spirit of Elijah*,¹⁷ but

14 [vv.1-2] '*Tiberius Caesar*' – Tiberius succeeded Augustus as emperor in A.D. 14 and reigned until A.D. 37. '*During the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas*' – Luke mentions the religious leadership of Palestine. *Annas* had been high priest A.D. 6-15. He refers to *Annas* as high priest at this time (but see *Jn.18:13,19*), possibly because of the continuing influence of *Annas*.

15 See *Is.40:3*

16 Without repentance there can be no receiving forgiveness. Forgiveness is the primary ingredient of the new age that is dawning (cf. *Lk.1:77*).

17 Cf. *Lk.1:17*

Jesus is *the real second Elijah* according to Luke. No signs as traditionally understood, are needed to document his credentials. Isaiah had used images of levelling, to say that someone was going to come preaching equality; to make *the Way of the Saviour easier*. For people who are struggling against inequalities, the image of an exodus to *the holy City (Jerusalem = City of GOD)* was very important.

John's preaching baptism, affirms *the Way of the LORD* is made easier by having a people already repentant of their sins and prepared for him by their practice of equity towards each other (*Lk.3:10ff*). John says the action necessary with his baptism of repentance is: a determined new attitude to build an equitable, fair and loving society. John affirmed that people with surplus possessions or food, had to share with those who lacked any. There was to be no extorting or abusing positions of power (*Lk.3:10*). John was preaching a radical equality.

items for sharing:

- *As in Baruch's time, we need to recall our origins, to counter any dulling of our Christian enthusiasm. **Comment on Baruch 5 : 1 – 19***
- *Genuine prayer directed to our neighbour's future, stems from true Christian relationships. **Comment on Philipians 1 : 8 – 10***
- *It is for us to hear the Baptist's call and make the way easier for the coming of the LORD. **Comment on Luke 3 : 1 - 6***

prayer:

*GOD of our salvation,
you straighten the winding ways of our hearts
and smooth the paths made rough by sin.
Make our conduct blameless, keep our hearts watchful in holiness,
and bring to perfection the good you have begun in us.
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 are challenged by the words of John the Baptist, to abandon our old failed ways. The need to act is urgent. GOD's reigning is near. But we need help to turn from our deceptions, cover-ups and denials, that we need to change our ways. The GOD, revealed by John, is a GOD of generous heart, who indeed helps us to level out our injustices and enables us to put people before possessions. It is the kind of help we need for reconciliation that makes it impossible for us to use others. As the day draws near for Jesus' coming, when the darkness of our waiting will be enlightened by his presence with us, we pray that any lingering greed for power, may not block us from the joy which moves the hearts of all who seek him. Amen.

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