

Our spirit of hope has been growing in intensity as the weeks of Advent have passed. In a rather paradoxical way we have been encouraged to look forward by progressively moving back in time. We began with the final day of the Lord, then turned our attention to the mission of John the Baptist, and now we focus on the coming birth of the Messiah.

All this looking both to the future and to the past serves but one purpose: that we live joyfully and faithfully in the present. Such a simple thing to state, but such a challenge to achieve. It is only by God's grace that we can live in the present, free from the burden of a dead past and untroubled by fear of an unknown future.

For this grace we give thanks today. As the second preface for Advent says: "It is by his gift that already we rejoice at the mystery of his Nativity, so that he may find us watchful in prayer and exultant in his praise".

## 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.

## 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.

O shepherd of Israel, hear us,  
shine forth from your cherubim throne.  
O Lord, rouse up your might,  
O 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

## 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.'

## First Reading

Many will be familiar with one particular verse from the prophet Micah because of its use in contemporary liturgical songs: "This is what the Lord asks of you: to act justly, to love tenderly, and to walk humbly with your God" (6:8). Sadly we never hear this proclaimed in a Sunday reading.

Today is the only time in the three-year cycle that Micah is read. Part of the text will sound familiar because it is quoted in Matthew's account of the birth of Jesus. When Herod is alarmed by the visit of the wise men, he calls the Jewish leaders together for advice. They cite a verse from this passage to confirm that the Messiah was to be born in Bethlehem (Mt 2:6).

Nothing much is known about Micah himself but he is considered one of the four great prophets of the 8<sup>th</sup> century BC, along with Amos, Isaiah and Hosea. He was fiercely critical of the corruption and injustice rampant in Israel, but still offered a word of hope to the people. Today's text is such a word.

Like many oracles Micah's pronouncement is couched in rather vague and ambiguous terms, leaving it open to interpretation. Essentially it is a promise of a messianic leader, a new shepherd king for Israel who will gather the people together and usher in an era of peace. This is the message that readers are to convey to the congregation. It calls for unhurried and thoughtful delivery. Readers would be wise to check and practise the pronunciation of "Ephrathah".

## Responsorial Psalm

Psalm 79/80 is a plea for the restoration of Israel. Only a few verses are prayed but they are rich in biblical themes: God as shepherd of Israel, as warrior lord, and as vine-dresser. There's allusion to the ark of the covenant ("your cherubim throne"), to the role of the king as God's representative ("the man you have chosen"), and to the identity of Israel as God's own people.

The response is a prayer that God will make us turn back to him. It is only by divine initiative that we can turn to God, see his face and be reconciled to him.

The refrain is relatively long. There needs to be a pause between the two parts of the petition to allow each its proper weight. Readers will need to ensure that the congregation doesn't mistake the first part for the whole refrain and respond prematurely. They can do this by the right combination of vocal tone and visual cue.

Overall the whole psalm is a heartfelt plea for divine assistance and should be proclaimed in that spirit.

## Second Reading

Much about the letter to the Hebrews remains unclear even today: who the author was, to whom the letter was addressed, and where and when it was composed. There is no doubt, however, that its literary style is the most sophisticated in the New Testament.

The letter (really an exhortation) has all the rhetorical flourish of an orator in full flight. Its overall purpose is clear – to argue that Jesus Christ is uniquely human and divine and has once and for all won free access to God for faithful believers – but its argumentation is complex. The author draws heavily on both Jewish scripture and Greek philosophy to make his case.

In today's reading the author quotes from a Greek version of Psalm 40 to argue that all the old forms of sacrifice and offering have been fulfilled in Jesus Christ. By his obedience, his willingness to surrender himself bodily into God's hands, he has made us holy. No doubt this passage has been chosen because of its emphasis on Jesus' bodily existence. It points directly to the incarnation that we are about to celebrate.

This is not an easy text for readers to deliver or for congregations to grasp. It has something of a lawyer's subtle argumentation about it. Readers will need to put extra time and effort into rehearsing their proclamation if they are to serve their people well.

## Gospel

The gospel reading is the story of Mary's visitation to Elizabeth. Luke's account of this event has both human appeal and theological intent.

We can readily identify with the shared joy of the two unexpectedly pregnant women, one young and unmarried, the other "getting on in years" and barren. Luke's story of their affectionate meeting has fired many a Christian imagination. But his purpose is far more profound than gaining our human interest. The whole scene is permeated by the Holy Spirit; both women are blessed and inspired.

But there is a difference between them. It is Mary's child who is the Lord, and even in the womb the Baptist bears witness to this. This sign prompts Elizabeth to a prophetic outburst, part of which became embedded long ago in the treasured prayer, the Hail Mary. Though we do not hear it today, we know that Mary's own wonderful canticle of praise, the Magnificat, follows immediately.

Familiar though this story is, its blend of homeliness and grace has an unerring attraction. It serves well to prepare us for the birth of the Lord.