

All the readings for Mass At Dawn, including the responsorial psalm, are quite brief. It might be tempting to think that they have been deliberately chosen as such – out of concern for a presider tired from Midnight Mass or for people wanting to get going to the day's family celebrations. This is highly unlikely. They have been chosen to shed further light on the mystery of the incarnation.

Together they invite the community to reflect on the meaning of Christ's birth as Christmas Day dawns around the world. They take us beyond the immediate excitement of the birth itself; now it is time to muse on its import along with Mary who "treasured all these things and pondered them in her heart".

A reading from the prophet Isaiah

62:11-12

This the Lord proclaims
to the ends of the earth:

Say to the daughter of Zion, 'Look,
your saviour comes,
the prize of his victory with him,
his trophies before him'.
They shall be called 'The Holy People',
'The Lord's Redeemed'.
And you shall be called 'The-sought-after',
'City-not-forsaken'.

Responsorial Psalm

Ps 96:1, 6, 11-12

R. A light will shine on us this day:
the Lord is born for us.

The Lord is king, let earth rejoice,
the many coastlands be glad.
The skies proclaim his justice;
all peoples see his glory. R.

Light shines forth for the just
and joy for the upright of heart.
Rejoice, you just, in the Lord;
give glory to his holy name. R.

First Reading

The two verses that make up the reading from the prophet Isaiah conclude the chapter that began with the verses proclaimed at the Vigil Mass. They resonate with the same joy and delight – God is returning triumphantly to Zion and will restore its glory. God and Israel will be pledged again to each other in covenant love, like bride and groom at a wedding feast.

Because the reading is short, and cut off from the earlier part of the chapter, its meaning may not be immediately obvious to the congregation. Readers have no opportunity to explain the context, but can prepare by taking time to read the whole chapter and to grasp what the final verses are saying. The better their understanding, the more likely it is that they will proclaim the text well and communicate its general sense to the community.

As outlined in the commentary on the Vigil reading, Isaiah is offering encouragement to a people that has returned from exile and is struggling to rebuild the city and their lives. They seem to feel abandoned and alone. Isaiah reassures these people in God's name: "Look, your saviour comes". They who feel forgotten by God will be called "The Holy People" and "The Lord's Redeemed". Far from being cast off, they will be "The-sought-after" and "City-not-forsaken".

Since the reading is short and may seem rather cryptic, the reader needs to proclaim it at a moderate pace and with positive emphasis. The congregation should not be mistaken about the encouragement it gives.

Responsorial Psalm

The psalm from which the two verses are taken is a hymn in praise of the reign of God. No doubt it has been selected because of the reference to light in its final verse. The response makes the link between light and the birth of Christ explicit: "A light will shine on us this day: the Lord is born for us".

This small unit captures and reinforces the spirit of Christmas. The whole of creation is caught up in praise of the God who reigns over all. We are the people who rejoice in the glory and goodness of God and sing God's praises. The psalm is to be proclaimed in this spirit.

A reading from the letter of St Paul to Titus

3:4-7

When the kindness and love of God our saviour for mankind were revealed, it was not because he was concerned with any righteous actions we might have done ourselves; it was for no reason except his own compassion that he saved us, by means of the cleansing water of rebirth and by renewing us with the Holy Spirit which he has so generously poured over us through Jesus Christ our saviour. He did this so that we should be justified by his grace, to become heirs looking forward to inheriting eternal life.

A reading from the holy Gospel according to Luke

2:15-20

Now when the angels had gone from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, 'Let us go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened which the Lord has made known to us.' So they hurried away and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in the manger. When they saw the child they repeated what they had been told about him, and everyone who heard it was astonished at what the shepherds had to say. As for Mary, she treasured all these things and pondered them in her heart. And the shepherds went back glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen; it was exactly as they had been told.

Second Reading

As was the case at the Mass During the Night the second reading for the Mass at Dawn is taken from the letter to Titus. Much of what is said in the commentary for the earlier Mass applies to this passage too.

Whether the letter is by Paul or a later disciple is in dispute, but the fertile flow of ideas and the lengthy sentences that result are certainly Pauline in character. As advised in the previous commentary, readers will need to read and re-read this text several times to be sure they have grasped the key point that is being made. What are the fundamental assertions? Where are they made? What are the ideas prompted by these statements that are added on?

The opening phrase recalls the Christmas message: "When the kindness and love of God our saviour for mankind were revealed . . .". This leads to the key teaching of the text – that our salvation has not been achieved by our own work but by the grace of God. This truth is repeated in various ways: "it was not because he was concerned with any righteous actions we might have done ourselves"; "it was for no reason except his own compassion that he saved us"; "he did this so that we should be justified by his grace".

This is a core Pauline teaching, that we are saved by faith and grace not by our own righteousness. This is the good news that Paul so passionately proclaimed. This is the message that the reader needs to get across. Along the way the author of the letter elaborates on how the gift of salvation is bestowed on us: "by means of the cleansing water of rebirth and by renewing us with the Holy Spirit . . .". This is a lengthy aside which the reader needs to deliver with assurance but perhaps in a slightly less forthright way.

Gospel

This morning's gospel text follows on directly from that of Mass During the Night. That passage concluded with the angelic chorus heard by the shepherds: "Glory to God in the highest heaven". Already the shepherds have been key characters in the Lucan drama; they now continue on centre stage.

In ancient times shepherds were often considered outsiders, even ruffians and thieves; they ranked very low on the social scale. In keeping with Luke's emphasis on the poor and lowly, he makes them the recipients and bearers of the unimaginably good news of the Saviour's birth. The enthusiasm with which they bear witness, and the astonishment which their story provokes, might remind some of the two disciples rushing back to Jerusalem from their supper at Emmaus. They too have good news that they cannot wait to share.

To complement the extraversion of the shepherds, Luke presents the contemplative spirit of Mary, who "treasured all these things and pondered them in her heart". With superb craftsmanship Luke has sketched out the twofold mission of Christian believers: to pray and to proclaim.