

The entrance antiphon for the third Sunday of Advent remains true to tradition. It's from Paul's letter to the Philippians (4:4-5). Its first word is "Rejoice" or in Latin "Gaudete" – hence the common title for this day, "Gaudete Sunday." Whatever the history of this term, today's readings (apart from the gospel) are filled with an infectious spirit of joy.

At this mid-point of the season our hopes and expectations are intensifying. The feast of Christmas will soon be here. Today's celebration gives us the opportunity to look beyond the hectic demands that December makes of us. It invites us to find a deeper well-spring of joy than that offered by all our end-of-the-year activities. This joy is truly the gift of God.

## A reading from the prophet Isaiah

61:1–2, 10–11

The spirit of the Lord has been given to me,  
for the Lord has anointed me.  
He has sent me to bring good news to the poor,  
to bind up hearts that are broken;

to proclaim liberty to captives,  
freedom to those in prison;  
to proclaim a year of favour from the Lord.

'I exult for joy in the Lord,  
my soul rejoices in my God,  
for he has clothed me in the garments of salvation,  
he has wrapped me in the cloak of integrity,  
like a bridegroom wearing his wreath,  
like a bride adorned in her jewels.

'For as the earth makes fresh things grow,  
as a garden makes seeds spring up,  
so will the Lord make both integrity and praise  
spring up in the sight of the nations.'

## Responsorial Psalm

Luke 1:46–50, 53–54

R. My soul rejoices in my God.

My soul glorifies the Lord,  
my spirit rejoices in God, my Saviour.  
He looks on his servant in her nothingness;  
henceforth all ages will call me blessed. R.

The Almighty works marvels for me.  
Holy his name!  
His mercy is from age to age,  
on those who fear him. R.

He fills the starving with good things,  
sends the rich away empty.  
He protects Israel, his servant,  
remembering his mercy. R.

## First Reading

The first few verses of today's reading from the prophet Isaiah are likely to sound familiar to readers and congregation alike. The gospel writer Luke puts them on the lips of Jesus in the synagogue at Nazareth (Lk 4:18). They are the words with which Jesus first announces his mission. In that dramatic episode which prefigures Jesus' fate, he finds the initial enthusiasm of his hearers quickly turn to violent rejection.

The text for today consists of the first and last two verses of Chapter 61. It will repay the reader to take the time to read through the whole chapter and sense its spirit. It is a prolonged message of good news for the community that has returned from exile to Jerusalem. Examining the chapter in full will also reveal where the transition is made from one part to the other in the lectionary text. Perceptive readers may also note a connection with the mysterious servant of the Lord about whom we read in Holy Week; he too is endowed with God's Spirit (Is 42:1).

Each phrase of this joyful reading deserves to be savoured. The passage is set out in short lines, making it very easy for the reader to allow each one its due weight. The challenge for the reader is to sustain a spirit of joyful enthusiasm throughout the proclamation, but to do so at a measured pace without any hint of haste. This will enable the congregation to hear this litany of divine promises and take it all to heart.

## Responsorial Psalm

Unusually, the responsorial psalm is not taken from the Book of Psalms as such, but from the gospel of Luke. All will quickly recognise it as part of Mary's canticle of praise, the Magnificat. Though Mary's prayer is a New Testament text, found in the gospel of Luke, every verse has parallels in the prayers of the Old Testament. This enables us all to pray the Magnificat in profound solidarity with God's original and abiding people, even as it makes us mindful of the incarnation we are preparing to celebrate.

The response is an abbreviation of the first two lines of the Magnificat. The verses echo the message of the prophet Isaiah that we have just heard. This prayer should be a joy for both reader and congregation to pray.

## A reading from the first letter of St Paul to the Thessalonians

5:16–24

Be happy at all times; pray constantly; and for all things give thanks to God, because this is what God expects you to do in Christ Jesus.

Never try to suppress the Spirit or treat the gift of prophecy with contempt; think before you do anything - hold on to what is good and avoid every form of evil.

May the God of peace make you perfect and holy; and may you all be kept safe and blameless, spirit, soul and body, for the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. God has called you and he will not fail you.

## A reading from the holy Gospel according to John 1:6–8, 19–28

A man came, sent by God.

His name was John.

He came as a witness,

as a witness to speak for the light,

so that everyone might believe through him.

He was not the light,

only a witness to speak for the light.

This is how John appeared as a witness. When the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, 'Who are you?' he not only declared, but he declared quite openly, 'I am not the Christ.' 'Well then,' they asked 'are you Elijah?' 'I am not' he said. 'Are you the Prophet?' He answered, 'No.' So they said to him, 'Who are you? We must take back an answer to those who sent us. What have you to say about yourself?' So John said, 'I am, as Isaiah prophesied:

a voice that cries in the wilderness:

Make a straight way for the Lord.'

Now these men had been sent by the Pharisees, and they put this further question to him, 'Why are you baptising if you are not the Christ, and not Elijah, and not the prophet?' John replied, 'I baptise with water; but there stands among you unknown to you the one who is coming after me; and I am not fit to undo his sandal-strap.' This happened at Bethany, on the far side of the Jordan, where John was baptising.

## Second Reading

The second reading comes from the conclusion of the very first letter attributed to Paul the apostle. Written about the year 50, it is understood to be the oldest book in the New Testament. At that time there was still a vivid expectation that Christ would soon return in glory to bring all things to completion. This is one of the issues that prompt Paul to write to the Christian community at Thessalonica. In the section of the letter just prior to today's excerpt, Paul encourages the community to remain ready for the day of the Lord but to do so in a spirit of calm confidence.

This allows him to go on with advice about how they should be living their lives while they wait. It is all very positive and uplifting. He wants them to be happy, to pray constantly, to be thankful, to stay open to the Spirit, to let God bless them with holiness, and to trust God's faithfulness.

Every one of these good wishes remains welcome and timely. The pleasant task that readers have is to communicate them to the congregation in the same affectionate spirit with which Paul first wrote to the Thessalonians.

## Gospel

Because Mark's account of the preaching of John the Baptist is quite short (we heard all of it last Sunday), today we have an extract from the gospel of John to fill the gap. John devotes much more space in his gospel to the role of the Baptist, partly at least to dispel any lingering misunderstanding about him. John the Baptist was not the Messiah but a witness to the Messiah.

The gospel reading is a combination of two passages from the first chapter of John. The first consists of three verses taken from the profound poetic meditation that opens the gospel (Jn 1:1–18). The Prologue interweaves reflection on the eternal-Word-made-flesh with comment on the Baptist: "He was not the light, but only a witness to speak for the light".

The second comes from the narrative that follows. John goes to great lengths to insist on the Baptist's subordinate status. Time and again he has the Baptist voice his own denials; he is neither the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the prophet. The question that the priests and Levites put to John – "Who are you?" – will become a recurring theme of the gospel in relation to Jesus. Where does he come from, and who is he? The answer to this is at last spelt out explicitly twenty chapters later, at the original end of the gospel (Jn 20:31).