

HEARERS OF THE WORD

Micah 5:2-5 (1-4); Psalm 80 (79); Hebrews 10:5-10; Luke 1:39-44

Why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me?

Luke 1:39 In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, 40 where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. 41 When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb.

And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit 42 and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. 43 And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? 44 For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. 45 And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her by the Lord."

46 *And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord, 47 and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour, 48 for he has looked with favour on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; 49 for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name.*

50 *His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. 51 He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. 52 He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; 53 he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. 54 He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, 55 according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever."*

56 *And Mary remained with her about three months and then returned to her home.*

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

The lectionary offers the short form of the story, but the Magnificat is equally part of it and is therefore restored here. This vignette, unique to Luke, brings the two prophets together in their respective mothers' wombs. As such, it forms part of Luke's theology that John and Jesus are related, on the level of the history of

salvation, and, at the same time, that the second prophet, Jesus, is greater than the first, John. This distinction is already made clear in the various things which have been already about each child (see the annunciations to Zechariah and to Mary) and now, John, an unconscious child, signals the arrival of the Messiah. The passage which follows this greeting by Elizabeth is one of the most subversive in the New Testament, Mary's hymn of praise, the Magnificat.

How historical these stories might be can be gauged from a story later in the same Gospel according to Luke:

The disciples of John reported all these things to him. So John summoned two of his disciples and sent them to the Lord to ask, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" When the men had come to him, they said, "John the Baptist has sent us to you to ask, 'Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?'" Jesus had just then cured many people of diseases, plagues, and evil spirits, and had given sight to many who were blind. And he answered them, "Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offence at me." (Luke 7:18-23)

And Mary remained with her about three months and then returned to her home. (Luke 1:56). That Mary stays three months and then departs is a bit odd (six and three being nine) but the presence of Mary at the birth of John would have complicated the narrative unnecessarily and would have served no purpose.

KIND OF WRITING

This single scene makes sense only against the background of Luke 1-2 (or even Luke 1:5-4:15) as a whole. The

Thought for the day

Even in its resolutely secular form, the Christmas celebration has positive sides to it. People do try very hard to get together with close family and friends. It might help to reflect *in advance* on this seasonal intensity of encounter. What do I hope for? What do I bring? How can I/we be so that we are not simply in the same physical space but truly meet each other and are the better for it? There should be some leap of joy, so that at the end of the festivities, we are glad we made the effort.

Prayer

God of all loving, bless all our encounters this Christmas. Help us to be both kind and joyful, so that all whom we meet will be the better for it. Inspire us to know when a word of witness will lift the celebration and enable family and friends to get to the heart of it all.

Infancy Narrative of Luke may be seen to fall into seven very skilfully constructed *tableaux*, as in the table below. Each scene has three characteristics as described below.

- (1) Each tableau begins with a setting of the *scene*, whether historical or biblical.
- (2) Entry of chief *personality/s*, and in due course, their exit / a concluding statement.
- (3) Climax in the form of some kind of *revelation* (which highlights the theological significance of the scene)

1. <i>Annunciation</i> of the birth of John: 1:5-25	2. <i>Annunciation</i> of the birth of Jesus: 1:26-38
3. The <i>Visitation</i> : John "acknowledges" Jesus: 1:39-56	
4. The <i>Birth</i> of John: 1:57-80	5. The <i>Birth</i> of Jesus: 2:1-21
6. The <i>presentation</i> in the Temple (2:22-40)	
7. The boy Jesus <i>teaches</i> in the Temple: 2:41-52	

the Angel's message in 1, 2 and 5; an inspired canticle in 3, 4 and 6 and Jesus' first recorded words in 7).

The only "encounter" between the two sets of protagonists in Luke 1-2 is the Visitation, which thereby has an almost disproportionate significance.

OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND

Blessed shall be the fruit of your womb, the fruit of your ground, and the fruit of your livestock, both the increase of your cattle and the issue of your flock. (Deut 28:4)

Then Uzziah said to her, "O daughter, you are blessed by the Most High God above all other women on earth; and blessed be the Lord God, who created the heavens and the earth, who has guided you to cut off the head of the leader of our enemies. (Jdt 13:18—not *wholly* inappropriate given the political nature of the Magnificat!)

NEW TESTAMENT FOREGROUND

There are explicit connections with the rest of the Gospel. These links are always on a thematic level; no one within the ministry ever seems to "remember" any of this, not even John the Baptist himself. But the theological themes anticipated here are present in the two volumes of Luke-Acts.

"To fill" or "to fulfil": Luke 1:15, 20, 23, 41, 57, 67; 2:6, 21-22, 40; 3:5; 4:21, 28; 5:7, 26; 6:11; 7:1; 9:31; 21:22, 24; 22:16; 24:44; Acts 1:16; 2:2, 4, 28; 3:10, 18; 4:8, 31; 5:3, 17, 28; 7:23, 30; 9:17, 23; 12:25; 13:9, 25, 27, 45, 52; 14:26; 19:21, 29; 24:27.

Holy Spirit: Luke 1:15, 35, 41, 67; 2:25-26; 3:16, 22; 4:1; 10:21; 11:13; 12:10, 12; Acts 1:2, 5, 8, 16; 2:4, 33, 38; 4:8, 25, 31; 5:3, 32; 6:5; 7:51, 55; 8:15, 17, 19; 9:17, 31; 10:38, 44-45, 47; 11:15-16, 24; 13:2, 4, 9, 52; 15:8, 28; 16:6; 19:2, 6; 20:23, 28; 21:11; 28:25.

Joy, rejoice: Luke 1:14, 44, 47; 10:21.

Blessed: Luke 1:45; 6:20-22; 7:23; 10:23; 11:27-28; 12:37-38, 43; 14:14-15; 23:29.

At that same hour Jesus rejoiced in the Holy Spirit and said, "I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. All things have been handed over to me by my Father; and no one knows who the Son

is except the Father, or who the Father is except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him." (Luke 10:21-22)

ST PAUL

But even if I am being poured out as a libation over the sacrifice and the offering of your faith, I am glad and rejoice with all of you—and in the same way you also must be glad and rejoice with me. (Phil 2:17-18)

Finally, my brothers and sisters, rejoice in the Lord. (Phil 3:1)

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. (Phil 4:4)

I rejoice in the Lord greatly that now at last you have revived your concern for me; indeed, you were concerned for me, but had no opportunity to show it. (Phil 4:10)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

The two story lines of birth are brought together here. Elizabeth pronounces a brief exclamation of praise and Mary a much longer canticle.

Verse 39 The "hill country" and "Judah" are mentioned again in Luke 1:65. Tradition has identified the town as Ein Kerem (in southwest Jerusalem today).



Verse 40 Mentioning Zechariah reminds us of the earlier annunciation to him, which opened Luke's narrative.

Verse 41 The leaping—the "quickenning" of the womb—is symbolic of the arrival of salvation. For Luke's purposes, it constitutes an acknowledgement of the Messiah by the Baptist. As above, the Holy Spirit is the energy behind the project of Jesus and the proclamation of the Good News. For leaping in the womb: cf. *Isaac prayed to the Lord for his wife, because she was barren; and the Lord granted his prayer, and his wife Rebekah conceived. The children struggled together within her; and she said, "If it is to be this way, why do I live?" So she went to inquire of the Lord. And the Lord said to her, "Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples born of you shall be divided; the one shall be stronger than the other, the elder shall serve the younger."* (Gen

25:21-23)

Verse 42 A double beatitude, behind which stand the Old Testament references above.

Verse 43 "My Lord" means that Jesus is already proclaimed Lord. It is by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit that Elizabeth recognises the moment of salvation.

Verse 44 The reason for the leaping is given: sheer joy in salvation, a key theme in Luke-Acts.

Verse 45 The contrast is with Zechariah who did not believe and was struck dumb. Mary did believe and gives her great canticle *before* Zechariah gives his. This is a key verse for the Lucan theology of Mary as model disciple. Cf. Lk 8:19-21; 11:27-28; Acts 1:14. NB the omission of "in his own house" in Lk 4:24, in considerable contrast with Mk 6:4.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. The greeting of Elizabeth to Mary "Blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb" is a joyful welcome of the child to come. Bringing new life into the world through pregnancy and birth is one of the most awesome human experiences. How have you experienced this for yourself or in someone close to you?

2. The image of the pregnant Mary going a distance to visit her cousin is a symbol of willingness to look beyond one's own needs to the needs of others. When have you witnessed that kind of generosity in others, or have been able to act in this way yourself?

3. Mary is praised for her faith, because she believed the promise made her by the Lord would be fulfilled. In what ways have you experienced blessings from your faith and trust in God's promises?

PRAYER

Who are we, Lord God, that you should come to us? Yet you have visited your people and redeemed us in your Son.

As we prepare to celebrate his birth, make our hearts leap for joy at the sound of your Word, and move us by your Spirit to bless your wonderful works.

We ask this through him whose day draws near: your Son, Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Then I said, ‘See, God, I have come to do your will, O God’

Heb 10:1 *Since the law has only a shadow of the good things to come and not the true form of these realities, it can never, by the same sacrifices that are continually offered year after year, make perfect those who approach.* 2 *Otherwise, would they not have ceased being offered, since the worshipers, cleansed once for all, would no longer have any consciousness of sin?* 3 *But in these sacrifices there is a reminder of sin year after year.* 4 *For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.*

Heb 10:5 Consequently, when Christ came into the world, he said, “Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired, but a body you have prepared for me; 6 in burnt offerings and sin offerings you have taken no pleasure. 7 Then I said, ‘See, God, I have come to do your will, O God’ (in the scroll of the book it is written of me).”

8 When he said above, “You have neither desired nor taken pleasure in sacrifices and offerings and burnt offerings and sin offerings” (these are offered according to the law), 9 then he added, “See, I have come to do your will.” He abolishes the first in order to establish the second. 10 And it is by God’s will that we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

The reading is probably chosen because of the sense of arrival (*I have come to do your will*), thus making it suitable for Advent. Although it might feel a bit out of season to be talking about the sacrifice of Jesus, in reality Hebrews makes a significant link between the incarnation (the term is not used) and salvation. The opening verses of Hebrews are the second reading for the day Mass of Christmas (see below). The writer depends on this true humanity of Jesus for his teaching on salvation. Christ can help us because he is like us (see below).

KIND OF WRITING

The Letter to the Hebrews shows the following sequence (according to Albert Vanhoye SJ):

1:1-4	Introduction
1:5-14	Exposition
2:1-4	Exhortation
2:5-5:10	Exposition
5:11-6:20	Exhortation
7:1-10:18	Exposition

10:19-39	Exhortation
11:1-40	Exposition
12:1-13	Exhortation
12:14-13:19	Exhortation
13:20-25	Conclusion

In an intriguing way, the writer alternates between exposition (straight doctrinal teaching) and exhortation (moral advice). Our reading comes from the key teaching section 7:1-10:18.

CONTEXT IN THE COMMUNITY

The temple in Jerusalem had been destroyed before this letter was written. Like other Jewish groups, the Christians asked themselves where is the point of access now to the presence of God. Hebrews gives a profound answer, not unlike what you might find in Paul or even in the Gospel of John. A citation from John may serve to illustrate.

Jesus answered them, “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.” The Jews then said, “This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?” But he was speaking of the temple of his body. (John 2:19–21; NB also John 4:21-23)

RELATED PASSAGES

Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, 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. 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, having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs. (Hebrews 1:1–4)

Therefore he had to become like his brothers and sisters in every respect, so that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make a sacrifice of atonement for the sins of the people. Because he himself was tested by what he suffered, he is able to help those who are being tested. (Hebrews 2:17–18)

Since, then, we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast to

our confession. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathise with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need. (Hebrews 4:14–16)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verses 5-7 Ps 40:6-7 in the Septuagint is significantly different from the Hebrew text. Key manuscripts (e.g. Codex Sinaiticus) read “a *body* you have prepared for me” instead of the obscure “*ears* you have prepared for me.” The “scroll of the book” is shorthand for saying the Scriptures point to Christ.

Verse 8 It is Old Testament teaching that God prefers obedience and observance of the law within the heart (1 Sam 15:22; Ps 50:8–10; Isa 1:10–13; Jer 7:21–24; Hos 6:6; Amos 5:21–26) to sacrifice. The inner movement of the heart is more important than the external temple services.

Verse 9 The contrast is read to mean that the temple system has been set aside. This is part of a larger argument that the previous system was only a shadow, not the reality. Repetition implies imperfection in contrast with Jesus’ offering “once for all.” The true sacrifice of Jesus is not a blood sacrifice but a movement of the heart, his faithfulness.

Verse 10 This is a very tight summary of the teaching of Hebrews. Contrary to what might seem evident, Jesus’ death both abolished and fulfilled OT “types.” For us, this means salvation and sanctification. Note that “body” is taken up again (= Psalm 40 again) but also reminding us the concrete, costly “listening” of Jesus in his death on the cross.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. The contrasts may speak to my own experience: outward versus inward worship, temporary versus lasting.
2. Jesus’ obedience—that is, deep listening—challenges me to review my own reality as a “hearer of the word.”

PRAYER

O God, in the faithful obedience of Jesus we see your own faithfulness, compassion and love. Help us to be faithful to you, to embrace your will for us and to say with Jesus, “I have come to do your will.” Amen.

From you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel

Mic. 5:2 But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah,
who are one of the little clans of Judah,
from you shall come forth for me
one who is to rule in Israel,
whose origin is from of old,
from ancient days.

3 Therefore he shall give them up until the time
when she who is in labour has brought forth;
then the rest of his kindred shall return
to the people of Israel.

4 And he shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of the LORD,
in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God.
And they shall live secure, for now he shall be great
to the ends of the earth;

5 and he shall be the one of peace.

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

With Christmas just around the corner, it is easy to see why this reading was chosen. Naturally, even such a reading had a meaning in its historical context. It is important to establish this before going on to look at the reception of this oracle in Christian tradition.

KIND OF WRITING

The passage chosen—of obscure origin—speaks, in a highly idealised fashion, of a future ruler, of the line of David: an oracle.

ORIGIN OF THE READING

The opening words of the Book of Micah can help us here: *The word of the LORD that came to Micah of Moresheth in the days of Kings Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah of Judah, which he saw concerning Samaria and Jerusalem.* (Mic 1:1) Micah was an eighth century bc prophet from Judah.

The book as a whole as the following structure:

- I. Superscription (1:1)
- II. Punishment (1:2–3:12)
- III. Hope (4:1–5:15 [Heb. 5:14])
- Restoration (6:1–7:20)

Our section comes from III, dealing with promises to David and his family.

The book as a whole can be quite difficult to read, coming from differing settings and times. It is often thought that our chapter 5, for example, comes from a later period of the late Judahite monarchy, under the inspiration of the Deuteronomist reforms (see OT below).

OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND

Ruth 4:11 Then all the people who were at the gate, along with the elders, said, “We are witnesses. May the Lord make the woman who is coming into your house like Rachel and Leah, who together built up the house of Israel. May you produce children in Ephrathah and bestow a name in Bethlehem.

A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots. (Is 11:1)

Now why do you cry aloud? Is there no king in you? Has your counsellor perished, that pangs have seized you like a woman in labor? Writhe and groan, O daughter Zion, like a woman in labor; for now you shall go forth from the city and camp in the open country; you shall go to Babylon. There you shall be rescued, there the Lord will redeem you from the hands of your enemies. (Mic 4:9–10)

On that day the remnant of Israel and the survivors of the house of Jacob will no more lean on the one who struck them, but will lean on the Lord, the Holy One of Israel, in truth. A remnant will return, the remnant of Jacob, to the mighty God. (Is 10:20–21; cf. Is 66:7–8 Ezek 34:23–24)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 2 Fidelity to David’s line is the key here, those profiling God’s faithfulness. “From of old” suggests that the ancestors were some considerable time ago, so this may be one of the more recent parts of Micah. In Hebrew: from you for me one will go out to be a ruler over Israel. Without naming David ex-

PLICITLY, the reading clearly alludes to him. The hope is that another “David” may usher in a new period of national glory.

Verse 3 This verse seems to reflect on exile, interpreted as punishment and promising return. The language is somewhat apocalyptic on account of the image of labour pains. It is the people, so to speak, who are in labour, not an individual person. Cf. Mic 4:9–10 above. “The rest of his kindred” are fellow Judahites. Northern tribes are referred to by “people of Israel”. In an idealised future, these should be reunited.

Verse 4 This promise uses already venerable images of shepherding, an ancient tradition with clear links to the Davidic monarchy. “He shall be great” is cited in Luke’s Gospels: *He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David.* (Luke 1:32)

Verse 5 As always, peace has a rich resonance in the Bible: well-being, prosperity, fecundity. There is, perhaps, a late echo of this in Ephesians: *For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us.* (Eph 2:14)

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. Peace—the gift of the Messiah. When have I been at peace myself? Am I a source of peace to others?
2. Flock—Jesus cares for us. Who has cared for me? Who cares for me today? When have I known myself the loving care of God in my life?

3. Time— *For while we were still helpless, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly* (Romans 5:6). Time seems to be a uniquely human experience. Only we notice the passage of time; we realise that the present moment is fleeting; we know there are special moments which remain present to us even after time has marched on..

PRAYER

Loving and gracious God, we thank you for the gifts you give us in Jesus your Son: faith, hope and love.

Deepen our faith; fulfil our hope; open our hearts.

Let this Christmas season be for us once more the right time of his coming, so that Christ may be born in our hearts and brought forth again in our lives. Amen.

THE LITURGY

Micah 5:2-5 (1-4); Psalm 80 (79); Hebrews 10:5-10; Luke 1:39-44

READINGS 1 AND 3

The usual clear link between the first and third readings is missing here. Instead, there is a link at the level of the Christian reception of Micah, when the shepherd is seen to be Jesus about to be born who is “present” also in the Gospel.

THE RESPONSORIAL PSALM

The Psalm explores the image of shepherding, thus responding to the final verses of the reading from Micah.

SUNDAY INTRODUCTIONS

First Reading

Micah 5:1-4 (2-5)

The people who went before us faith longed for God to come more richly into their lives. As we hear this reading, we may ask ourselves what do I long for, as a person of faith, this Christmas?

Second Reading

Hebrews 10:5-10

The letter to the Hebrews—for all its apparently remote Temple language—asks a central question: what happened for us in the death of Jesus? The answer is a key to Christian discipleship in every age.

Gospel

Luke 1:39-44

Christmas is a time of travel and encounter, visiting and friendship. May we know in these Christmas encounters the blessedness and joy and the Holy Spirit!

WEEKDAY INTRODUCTIONS

Monday 20 December

Isaiah 7:10-14

This passage from Isaiah is explicitly cited in Matthew’s account of the announcement to Joseph in a dream.

Luke 1:26-38

The annunciation to Mary (the fourth in our sequence) matches the pattern of Old Testament annunciation scenes and then, significantly, breaks it. Mary is open to God’s call.

Tuesday 21 December

Song of Songs 2:8-14

You may be surprised to hear in Advent a reading often used at weddings. It is however very suitable for two reasons. (1) Love is the ‘reason for the season’ as they say. (2) Like the lover bounding over the hills, Mary in the Gospel travels across the hill country to visit Elizabeth, her cousin.

Zephaniah 3:14-18

This delightful reading already appeared on the third Sunday of Advent this year. Being such a ringing invitation to rejoice, it is good to hear it again. The image of God dancing for joy is, perhaps, not so usual among us!!

Luke 1:39-45

Luke joins his two strands of narrative in this encounter between the two mothers. We notice the deep things said about Jesus before his birth.

Wednesday 22 December

1 Samuel 1:24-28

Hannah very much wanted to have a baby and, after the child’s birth, sang a great song of thanksgiving. Hannah’s song was the inspiration behind Mary’s song of thanksgiving, the Magnificat, in Luke’s Gospel.

Luke 1:46-56

Our responsorial “psalm”—the Song of Hannah—closely resembles the prayer of Mary in the Magnificat. Although this purports to be the meeting of the two pregnant cousins, very little is said of the children to come and instead we hear a great deal about social upheaval and reversal.

Thursday 23 December

Malachi 3:1-4, 23-24

To music lovers, this reading will sound familiar, from Handel’s *Messiah*. Malachi says that a figure like Elijah will usher in the end. This was taken to John the Baptist who ushered in, so to speak, the Messiah and the messianic age.

Luke 1:57-66

The birth of John is told to lay the foun-

ation for the similar yet significantly different birth of Jesus. Both come as the result of a promise. On both occasions, there is “treasuring in the heart.” Both children will enjoy the blessing of God. And yet, one is the forerunner and the other is the Christ.

Friday 24 December

2 Samuel 7:1-5, 8-12, 14, 16

Anyone who comes to Mass on this morning will hear a striking reading from 2 Samuel 7: in reality one of the key texts in the Old Testament. It portrays the fidelity of God as seen in God’s loyalty to David and his house. It makes for a great final reflection as we come to mark the birth of Jesus, the son of David, in whom all of God’s faithfulness came to be for us.

There is some word play in today’s reading: house means temple, residence and family line. Even in Nathan’s correction of David, a tremendous promise of God’s faithful through time, it comes to expression.

Luke 1:67-79

The Benedictus takes up the theme of the House of David and goes on to praise God who is now fulfilling in John and in Jesus his promises of old. The future role of John the Baptist is hauntingly evoked: *to prepare the way for him, to give his people knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins; this by the tender mercy of our God.*



24/25 December CHRISTMAS DAY

There will be special notes for Christmas Day, the following Sunday and the days afterwards.