

HEARERS OF THE WORD

Numbers 6:22-26; Psalm 67 (66); Galatians 4:4-7; Luke 2:16-21

Mary treasured all these words

Luke 2:15 When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us." 16 So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. 17 When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; 18 and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. 19 But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. 20 The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

This—the octave day of Christmas—used to be known as the Feast of the Circumcision, a traditional reminder that the roots of the Christian faith are firmly embedded in the Jewish faith. The change of title involves a loss of some kind but, nevertheless, our first and second readings sustain that sense of Jewish rootedness in a substantial way.

This reading was the Gospel for the Christmas Dawn Mass (while the commentary is more or less the same, the thought for the day, initial observations, the pointers for prayer and the closing collect are all special for the feast.)

KIND OF WRITING

(i) History: In the context of the culture, this is "historical" writing, mirroring the conventions and practices of the time. In such cases, the writers use standard *topoi*, to express the significance of the person being written about. As can be seen in the notes, the history is a bit dodgy and the place given to the miraculous would not count as history today.

(ii) Midrash: Neither Matthew 1-2 nor Luke 1-2 is strictly midrash, a type of rewriting and filling out of biblical narratives found at the time. However, the strong links to biblical models and motifs lend a kind of midrashic air to the writing.



The icon of Mary, SALUS POPULI ROMANI (the health of the people of Rome), is said to have arrived in Rome in AD 590. The abbreviated letters in Greek at the top identify Mary as "Mother of God" (MHTHP ΘEOY).

The image type itself suggests an Early Christian concept dating from antiquity: a majestic, half-length portrait showing a frank outward gaze of the ruler-like Virgin, with her upright, stately pose and folded hands gently clasping the Child, unique among all icons.

OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND

(i) *David as shepherd*: When they came, he looked on Eliab and thought, "Surely the Lord's anointed is now before the Lord." But the Lord said to Samuel, "Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for the Lord does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart." Then Jesse called Abinadab, and made him pass before Samuel. He said, "Neither has the Lord chosen this one." Then Jesse made Shammah pass by. And he said, "Neither has the Lord chosen

Thought for the day

The start of a new civil year gives us pause to reflect on the twelve months just past and to look forward to the next year of our lives. There is always darkness and light. Still, we are sustained by this great hope, taken paradoxically from the Book of Lamentations:

The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. "The LORD is my portion," says my soul, "therefore I will hope in him." (Lamentations 3:22-24)

Prayer

All time is in your hands and so we dedicate ourselves to you at the start of this year year. May your grace be with us always and may we recognise your presence in all we meet and in all that happens. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

this one." Jesse made seven of his sons pass before Samuel, and Samuel said to Jesse, "The Lord has not chosen any of these." Samuel said to Jesse, "Are all your sons here?" And he said, "There remains yet the youngest, but he is keeping the sheep." And Samuel said to Jesse, "Send and bring him; for we will not sit down until he comes here." He sent and brought him in. Now he was ruddy, and had beautiful eyes, and was handsome. The Lord said, "Rise and anoint him; for this is the one." Then Samuel took the horn of oil, and anointed him in the presence of his brothers; and the spirit of the Lord came mightily upon David from that day forward. Samuel then set out and went to Ramah. (1 Sam 16:6-13)

(ii) *Davidic shepherd to come*: I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them: he shall feed them and be their shepherd. (Ezek 34:23) My servant David shall be king over them; and they shall all have one shepherd. They shall follow my ordinances and be careful to observe my statutes. (Ezek 37:24)

(iii) *Bethlehem*: Often mentioned in connection with David (1 Sam 17:12, 15; 20:6, 28; 2 Sam 23:14–16; 1 Chr 11:16–18; Luke 2:4; John 7:42). A significant echo can also be found in the book of Ruth (Ruth 1:1–2, 19, 22; 2:4; 4:11). The key text, however, is the one cited by Luke:

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. (Mic 5:2)

NEW TESTAMENT FOREGROUND

The Davidic origin of Jesus is important in the New Testament and present in the earliest texts, such as Romans 1:1–7. In the Gospels, it is important and present even in John's Gospel. David is a consistent subject of reflection also in Luke's second volume. For example:

The whole assembly kept silence, and listened to Barnabas and Paul as they told of all the signs and wonders that God had done through them among the Gentiles. After they finished speaking, James replied, "My brothers, listen to me. Simeon has related how God first looked favourably on the Gentiles, to take from among them a people for his name. This agrees with the words of the prophets, as it is written, 'After this I will return, and I will rebuild the dwelling of David, which has fallen; from its ruins I will rebuild it, and I will set it up, so that all other peoples may seek the Lord—even all the Gentiles over whom my name has been called. Thus says the Lord, who has been making these things known from long ago. (Acts 15:12–19)

"And now, friends, I know that you acted in ignorance, as did also your rulers. In this way God fulfilled what he had foretold through all the prophets, that his Messiah would suffer. Repent therefore, and turn to God so that your sins may be wiped out, so that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord, and that he may send the Messiah appointed for you, that is, Jesus, who must remain in heaven until the time of universal restoration that God announced long ago through his holy prophets. (Acts 3:17–21).

ST PAUL

Apart from Romans 1:1–7, Paul refers to David as the author of the Psalms. So also David speaks of the blessedness of those to whom God reckons righteousness apart from works: "Blessed are those whose

iniquities are forgiven, and whose sins are covered; blessed is the one against whom the Lord will not reckon sin." (Rom 4:6–8)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 15 Shepherds as such don't really recur in the Gospel. But there is, of course, the parable of the lost sheep in Luke 15:3–7.

Verse 16 Mary and Joseph were previously mentioned in Luke 1:27.

Verse 17 The word for what had been told them (*rhēma*) is a feature of Luke-Acts Mt (5) Mk (2) Lk (19) Jn (12) Acts (14). The range is from "what was said" to "an event that can be spoken about." That is, they bear witness, confirming their experience. Cf. Luke 24:35.

Verse 18 The "all" is very important for Matthew and for Luke and on this day means that salvation is offered to all without discrimination. Here are the occurrences: Mt (129) Mk (68) Lk (158) Jn (65) Acts (171). Cf. 'In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams. (Acts 2:17) Then Peter began to speak to them: "I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. You know the message he sent to the people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ—he is Lord of all (Acts 10:34–37). Amazement as a reaction is also a feature of Luke-Acts Mt (7) Mk (4) Lk (13) Jn (6) Acts (5)

Verse 19 The only two other occurrences of the word "treasured" illustrate the range of meaning rather well: (i) Neither is new wine put into old wineskins; otherwise, the skins burst, and the wine is spilled, and the skins are destroyed; but new wine is put into fresh wineskins, and so both are *preserved*." (Matt 9:17) (ii) for Herod feared John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man, and he *protected* him. When he heard him, he was greatly perplexed; and yet he liked to listen to him. (Mark 6:20)

In the New Testament, the other word "pondered" is limited to Luke-Acts (Luke 2:19; 14:31; Acts 4:15; 17:18; 18:27; 20:14). The meaning ranges from the literal (to take with) to the metaphorical (to consider, to discuss). Heart also has a certain prominence in Luke-Acts

Mt (16) Mk (11) Lk (22) Jn (7) Acts (20).

Verse 20 To glorify has a limited frequency in Luke-Acts, but of course it is extensively used in John's Gospel (4-1-9-23+5). The Gospel ends with something very like this: and they were continually in the temple blessing God. (Luke 24:53). Praising is special to Luke-Acts Mt (0) Mk (0) Lk (3) Jn (0) Acts (3), even if not that common. "Seen and heard" make an interesting combination. Cf. 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. (Luke 7:22) Then he said, 'The God of our ancestors has chosen you to know his will, to see the Righteous One and to hear his own voice; for you will be his witness to all the world of what you have seen and heard. And now why do you delay? Get up, be baptised, and have your sins washed away, calling on his name.' (Acts 22:14–16)

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. A new year invites us first of all to take stock of the last year — what were the moments which mattered and which somehow "stayed" with me? Was I able to see the hand of God in the people I met and in the various events? A moment of discernment and gratitude.

2. A new year also signals the chance of a new beginning — his mercies are new every morning! Can I open my heart to God's presence and grace in a new way this year?

3. If I were to name some hopes this year — for family, for myself, for my faith and discipleships — what comes to mind? A prayer to the Holy Spirit that we may be guided by God's grace today and always.

PRAYER

God most high, your only Son embraced the weakness of our flesh to give us the power to become your children; your eternal Word chose to dwell among us, that we might live in your presence.

Grant us a spirit of wisdom to know how rich in the glory you have made our own and how great the hope to which we are called in Jesus Christ, your Word made flesh, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, in the splendour of eternal light, God for ever and ever. Amen.

Born of a woman, under the Law

Gal 4:1 *Now I mean that the heir, as long as he is a minor, is no different from a slave, though he is the owner of everything. 2 But he is under guardians and managers until the date set by his father. 3 So also we, when we were minors, were enslaved under the basic forces of the world. 4 But when the appropriate time had come, God sent out his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, 5 to redeem those who were under the law, so that we may be adopted as sons with full rights. 6 And because you are sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, who calls "Abba! Father!" 7 So you are no longer a slave but a son, and if you are a son, then you are also an heir through God. (NET)*

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

Our reading is chosen because it mentions the mother of Jesus. The reference is rather general, indicating the common humanity we share with Jesus; nevertheless, the reading is suitable for feast because of what it says about us as children of God.

KIND OF WRITING

Although this is a relatively clear reading, the great letter to the Galatians does not yield its secrets easily! The overall pattern of the letter is like this:

Introduction	1:6-10
Topic	1:11-12
Step 1	1:13-2:21
Step 2	3:1-4:7
Step 3	4:8-5:12
Step 4	5:13-6:10
Conclusion	6:11-18

Our reading from from the second great argument or proof. Paul is keen to show that (1) that the Galatians already had the gifts of the Spirit; (2) that Jesus' death is an act of compassionate solidarity with all humanity; (3) that descent from Abraham is spiritual, not physical and (4) we are all equally children of God. This means that our reading—as the conclusion to this key discussion—has a specific, concrete meaning in the context of the letter. To make the connection with the letter clearer, the three opening verses have been included.

Address	3:1-5
Argument	3:6-14
Example	3:15-18
Question 1	3:19-20
Question 2	3:21-22
Conclusion 1	3:23-29

Conclusion 2 4:1-7

ORIGIN OF THE READING

The letter can be a challenge but the story behind it is relatively clear. Paul established in Galatia faith communities, made up exclusively of Gentiles. Later on, Jewish Christian evangelists arrived and created a major disturbance. They claimed to be connected in a significant way with the church in Jerusalem. This must have been true and had a big impact on the Galatians. They centred their message in the Mosaic Law, naming it as the venerable and permanent word of God, practiced by the Jerusalem Christ-believers, under the leadership of no less figure than James, the brother of the Lord. The putting back of the Torah, the Law, in its ritual observances (circumcision, dietary regulations and Sabbath observance), undermined Paul's Gospel of the extension of God's covenant grace to all humanity *without distinction*. Hence, the "warmly" argued, and great, Letter to the Galatians.

RELATED READING

So then, brothers and sisters, we are under obligation, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh (for if you live according to the flesh, you will die), but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body you will live. For all who are led by the Spirit of God are the children of God. For you did not receive the spirit of slavery leading again to fear, but you received the Spirit of adoption, by whom we cry, "Abba, Father." The Spirit himself bears witness to our spirit that we are God's children. And if children, then heirs (namely, heirs of God and also fellow heirs with Christ) —if indeed we suffer with him so we may also be glorified with him. (Romans 8:12–17)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verses 1-2 A minor, under Roman law, had no rights until majority was reached. Gal 3:1-4:7 gives the context.

Verse 3 In St Paul's mind, we were kept as "heirs without rights" until Jesus came and the Spirit was poured into our hearts. "Elemental forces" = earth, water, air and fire, a summary reference to the many gods and goddesses. The "we" is unexpected and may point in a general way to calendrical observances, common to both Judaism and polytheism.

Verse 4 Paul uses a unique expression the whole New Testament: the fullness (*plērōma*) of time (*tou chronou*). In the undisputed letters, he does use "fullness" but to mean either the inclusion of Jews in salvation (Rom 11:12) or the fulfilment of the law (Rom 13:10), both illuminating for this context. Here, he hints at calendar observances and the new time initiated by Christ. NB the humanity of Jesus comes first — born of a woman, a reflection of Paul's universalism. "Under the Law" is a rich Pauline expression: Rom 6:14-15; 1 Cor 9:20; Gal 3:23; 4:4-5, 21; 5:18.

Verse 5 To redeem is literally "to deliver", to set free, which is Paul's meaning here. Jesus' death and resurrection liberated us from the Law — meaning again, the ritual expression of ethnic identity (circumcision, dietary regulations and Sabbath observance). "Under the law" is repeated to emphasise the status of being a minor. The NET version keeps the gender specific word "sons" to echo the same word used of Jesus earlier.

Verse 6 The evidence of being set free is the experience of the Spirit. In Galatians, Paul insists the Gentiles had full experience of Spirit before the arrival of the Judaizers. NB Gal 3:1-5. The use of the Aramaic "*abba*" is pointed: they did not need instruction from these Judeans to pray as Jesus did. Heart = the seat of discernment and knowledge.

Verse 7 The argument is summarised in reverse: you were a minor, you are now a son or daughter of God and *therefore an heir* (Gal 4:1-2) and *therefore* no longer under the Law. The very next verse 8 is a key: they used to be "enslaved" to "gods" but seem to have chosen to be "enslaved" to the Law. But: *For freedom Christ has set us free.* (Galatians 5:1)

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. We can always ask ourselves: to what am I enslaved? How do I (paradoxically) curtain my freedom by my (false) choices? Who will set me free and how?
2. The Spirit is present and at work in each of us. How to I recognise that activity and presence?

PRAYER

God of every grace and gift, you have poured into our hearts the Spirit of your Son, enabling us to be your daughters and son and, even more, to call you, the sustainer of the cosmos, Abba, Father. May this extraordinary gift sustain us, now and always. Amen.

THE LITURGY

Numbers 6:22-26; Psalm 67 (66); Galatians 4:4-7; Luke 2:16-21

THE READINGS

The first reading is really independent, chosen because of the start of the civil year — a very suitable prayer of blessing. The Gospel is a repeat from Christmas, chosen to show Mary “treasuring all these things.”

THE RESPONSORIAL PSALM

Psalm 67 (66) is a perfect response to the Aaronic blessing: O God, be gracious and bless us.

FIRST READING

Numbers 6:22-27

For the start of the New Year, we listen to beautiful blessing from the Book of Numbers, known as the Blessing of Aaron.

SECOND READING

Galatians 4:4-7

This is the only reference in the Letters of St Paul to the mother of Jesus — and he mentions to emphasise that Jesus shared our common humanity and that in Jesus we are also the children of God.

GOSPEL

Luke 2:(15)16-20

We already heard this Gospel on Christmas day. It is chosen for the feast so we can see in Mary, as mother of the church, the ideal response to the Gospel.

Monday 2 January

Sts Basil the Great and Gregory Nazianzen, bishops, doctors

1 John 2:29-3:6

Today we hear a justly famous passage, which goes simply and directly to the heart of the matter. The proclamation of the love of God is completed by presenting the consequences for us as believers.

John 1:29-34

What John says of Jesus reflects the understanding of the Fourth Gospel, an understanding which is deep and challenging. Most likely, we are not really hearing the opinion of the historical John the Baptist but the theology of the evangelist.

Tuesday 3 January

St Munchin, bishop

1 John 3:7-10

The test of good living is not introspection but inspection of how we actually live and what choices we make. As Archbishop Temple put it long ago: it is not the action matters and prayer helps but that prayer matters and action is its test.

John 1:35-42

The question at the centre of this Gospel is the key question for life as such. A slightly more accurate translation could be: what do you desire? The question comes up again in John 20 with a highly significant adjustment: whom are you looking for?

Wednesday 4 January

1 John 3:11-21

Today's reading offers us a kind of spirituality of the incarnation. Because we have been loved, we have to love in return. The key verse is: This has taught us love — that he gave up his life for us; and we, too, ought to give up our lives for our brothers.

John 1:43-51

The call stories in John's Gospel can seem natural, simply, even naive. Like everything else in this Gospel, they call for interpretation. Why, for example, a fig tree precisely? The first species of tree mentioned in the Bible is the fig tree and the rabbinic tradition drew the conclusion that the tree of knowledge of good and evil was a fig tree. Then they took a leap: knowledge of good and evil is given in the Torah, God's Word, and so Philip was already searching the Scriptures.

Thursday 5 January

1 John 3:22-4:6

Something of the difficult situation of the Johannine community comes to expression here. Clearly, there has been a split over doctrine and there is great anxiety that the true believers might be “contaminated” by false teaching at the hands of false prophets.

Matthew 4:12-17, 23-25

Matthew “locates” the proclamation of Jesus with a mighty quotation from Isaiah. Following on the story of the Magi, we have a ringing affirmation of the inclusion of the Gentiles.

Epiphany 6 January

FIRST READING

Isaiah 60:1-6

The ingathering of Israel is expanded here to all those who search for God. It is a thrilling reading, which has enriched how we imagine the Magi.

SECOND READING

Ephesians 3:2-3, 5-6

Who is called into relationship with God? All of us, every human being without distinction. The revelation in Christ is an unveiling of God's longing for us.

GOSPEL

Matthew 2:1-12

How can we discover or rediscover God and Christ? Only by recognising that “you have made us for yourself and our hearts are restless until they come to rest in God.” The human condition may be summarised as “the heart in pilgrimage.”

Saturday 7 January

St Raymond of Peñafort

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