

HEARERS OF THE WORD

Isaiah 62:11-12; Psalm 97 (96); Titus 3:4-7; Luke 2:15-20

Let us go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place

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 reading is simply the continuation of the reading for Midnight Mass. Some of the information given there applies here too, of course. It illustrates a response to the events of salvation and already some are worshipping the baby.

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.

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 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;

Thought for the day

Sharing the excitement is a very human response. We have all done it at some stage: some great news in the family, perhaps at a promotion or the discovery of a place of spectacular beauty or some situation has turned around. The desire to let others know tells us that sharing such experiences is itself part of the original delight. Something similar may be said of the sense of discovery and delight we find in the Good News of Jesus. Like, the prophets of old (Jeremiah 6:19) or like St Paul (1 Cor 9:16), we just can't keep it in! We want, we *need* to let others know to complete our delight and our sense of discovery.

Prayer

In these days, loving God, give us not only courageous joy but joyful courage to proclaim to others our own delight at the discovery of Good News. May we be bearers of your Word. Amen.

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. This was no ordinary child. It is the

birth of the Son of God. In order to take in the implications of that we can do well to recall Meister Eckhart’s reflection and ask ourselves how the birth of Jesus takes place in us:

What good is it to me if the eternal birth of the divine Son takes place unceasingly but does not take place within myself? And what good is it to me if Mary is full of grace and if I am not also full of grace?

2. The shepherds were both frightened and thrilled. Good news can sometimes be terrifying. Pregnancy and the birth of a child can give rise to both feelings. Hopefully the joy and wonder at new life outweigh the fear and apprehension. What has been your experience?

PRAYER

Today, O God of light, your loving kindness dawns, your tender compassion breaks upon us, for in our Saviour, born of human flesh, you reveal your gracious gift of our birth to life eternal.

Fill us with the wonder of this holy day: let us treasure in our hearts what we have been told, that our lives may proclaim your great and gentle mercy.

We make our prayer through 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, for ever and ever. Amen.

FIRST READING

Isaiah 62:11–12

The reading proclaims salvation, as befits the day. But we are also in the reading, as the people saved, and wonderful things are said of us: The Holy People, the Redeemed of the Lord, the Sought-after, a City-not-Forsaken.

SECOND READING

Titus 3:4–7

Of course, we love to understand things and it is right that we should bring reason and faith together. Let’s not forget however, the real motive for God’s offer of salvation: it was for no reason, except his compassion and his extraordinary love for us all.

GOSPEL

Luke 2:15–20

How do we make our own this great day? The portrait of Mary in this short passage may help us to treasure what we hear and to ponder it in our hearts.

The goodness and loving kindness of God our saviour have appeared

Titus 3:3 *For we ourselves were once foolish, disobedient, led astray, slaves to various passions and pleasures, passing our days in malice and envy, despicable, hating one another.* 4 But when the goodness and loving kindness (*philanthrōpia*) of God our Saviour appeared, 5 he saved us, not because of any works of righteousness that we had done, but according to his mercy, through the water of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit. 6 This Spirit he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Saviour, 7 so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life. 8 *The saying is sure.*

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

There are three emphases which make this an attractive reading for Christmas: (i) the loving kindness of God (lit. God's *philanthrōpia*); (ii) all is gift and grace; (iii) through the Holy Spirit, we too become the sons and daughters of God, coheirs with Christ.

KIND OF WRITING

The Pastorals present themselves as personal letters from Paul to significant companions. In reality, they are written to communities (in Asia Minor) to bring Pauline doctrine into a later context. They preserve, however, the letter structure, as in the case of Titus:

1:1-4 Salutation
1:5-3:11 *Body of the letter*
3:12-15 Travels, greetings, blessing

The body of the letter:
1:5-9 Elders
1:10-16 Warnings
2:1-10 The Christian household
2:11-15 Appearance of Christ
3:1-11 **To the whole church**

The layout of the final chapter is clear:

Practical instruction: vv. 1-2
Theological support: vv. 3-8a
Direct encouragement: vv. 8b-11

The omitted verses 3 and 8 of the central section are included for completeness. Our reading is one of the “faithful” sayings found in the Pastorals: 1Tim 1:15; 3:1; 4:9; 2 Tim 2:11; and here in Titus 3:8.

CONTEXT IN THE COMMUNITY

The writer(s) of the Pastorals were facing a variety of threats at the start of the second century. In response, it is true that there is some domestication of the radical Paul but there is more to it than that.

The letters also represent a development of Pauline doctrine in several directions: (i) spirits, angels and the Holy Spirit; (ii) the church as the household of God, with great regards for the inspired Jewish Scriptures. The tension towards the end found in Paul is abandoned—there will still be a second coming, but it is in the very indefinite future.

As for date and place, mostly likely it comes from Asia Minor, around the year 100.

RELATED PASSAGES

For the *grace of God* has *appeared*, bringing *salvation* to all *people* (Titus 2:11)

This passage from Ephesians is remarkably similar to our reading

All of us once lived among them in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of flesh and senses, and we were by nature children of wrath, like everyone else. But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. (Eph 2:3–7)

It is not because of your righteousness or the uprightness of your heart that you are going in to occupy their land; but because of the wickedness of these nations the LORD your God is dispossessing them before you, in order to fulfil the promise that the LORD made on oath to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob. (Deut 9:5)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 4 The goodness of God is a genuinely Pauline expression (e.g. Rom 2:4; 3:12; 11:22). God's “*philanthrōpia*” is rarer being found only in Acts 28:2. The

NJB gets it right: the kindness and *love* of God our Saviour for *humanity*. To appear and appearance are typical of the vocabulary of later generations. Saviour—oddly rare in the Gospels and in Paul—is also an expression of later Christianity.

Verse 5a This verse is perhaps the clearest statement in all the Bible that salvation is wholly the initiative of God. The sentiment is not anti-Jewish because ancient Israelites / Jews were well aware of their status as the *elect* (see Deut 9:5 above). Neither is it a restatement of Paul—who contrasts grace *not with works righteousness* but with the *ritual law* (dietary laws etc.). Neither is it saying that works don't matter: it is simply affirming that our relationship with God is initiated and sustained by God's grace alone.

Verses 5b-6 Christians enter this grace through (i) baptism and the gift of the Spirit (ii) renewal (a word confined to Christian usage) and (iii) Jesus Christ our Saviour. For this writer, Saviour refers first to God the Father as giver and then to Jesus as the mediator. The Spirit receives less emphasis in the Pastorals, perhaps reflecting the settling down (institutionalisation) of The Way.

Verse 7 As the final verse in the lectionary excerpt, these words bring out the goal of the coming of Christ: that we might be heirs with him. Two Pauline themes are reflected here: justification by grace and becoming sons and daughters of God.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. In the secular celebration of Christmas, the giving of gifts is the defining action. Relationship and love, wonder and gratitude all come into play—and not only in our human interconnectedness but also in God's love affair with humanity.

2. Christmas is a time of rest and refreshment. This is good—and yet, it would be a pity not to rest to God too and experience refreshment in the faith. What shall *I* do to bring that about?

PRAYER

A bba, father and creator, we stand before you, in awe and thankfulness.

As we experience your gracious “*philanthrōpia*,” help us to become more and more like you, loving as we have been loved. Thus, may we become every more truly your sons and daughters. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

See, your saviour comes and his reward is with him

Isa 62:11 The LORD has proclaimed to the end of the earth: Say to daughter Zion, “See, your salvation comes; his reward is with him, and his recompense before him.” 12 They shall be called, “The Holy People, The Redeemed of the LORD”; and you shall be called, “Sought Out, A City Not Forsaken.”

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

The questions being addressed by Third Isaiah have a contemporary ring to them: Could they really believe God had forgiven them? In the light of recent experience, could they count on God's continued protection? Who could possibly be the leader of the community? Even more importantly, how could they so live that they might avoid repeating the sins and errors which brought on them the calamity of the exile in Babylon? All this is not so obvious in the short excerpt chosen for the dawn Mass of Christmas day. Nevertheless, v.11 reflects the idea the salvation is *not yet* a present reality while v. 12 expresses the feelings still remembered from the exile—a city *forsaken*.

None of this should take away from the real joy of the reading; but just as there is no cheap grace, there is likewise no cheap joy.

KIND OF WRITING

All of Is 61 is poetry, of course, and these few verses derive their power from the poetry. The typical parallelism is not exact, but the “uneasy synonymy” (R. Alter) has undoubted energy.

ORIGIN OF THE READING

As just noted, this reading comes from Third Isaiah, that is, from the final chapters 56-66. The exiles have returned after the fall of Babylon in 539 and the victory of Cyrus. However, not all have returned, reconstruction is difficult and there is conflict between two groups in the community. The centrepiece of the writing is chapters 60-62, with five units before (56:1-8; 56:9-57, 13; 57:14-21; 58; 59) and five units after (63:1-6; 63:7-64:2; 65; 66:1-16; 66:17-24).

OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND

(i) Daughter Zion: this term appears twenty-six times in the Old Testament, sometimes in parallel with “daughter

Jerusalem”. It appears in two contexts: disaster and redemption. As an example, reference may be made to the book of Lamentations (Lam 1:6; 2:1, 4, 8, 10, 13, 18; 4:22) and there is a striking example in Jeremiah: *For I heard a cry as of a woman in labour, anguish as of one bringing forth her first child, the cry of daughter Zion gasping for breath, stretching out her hands, “Woe is me! I am fainting before killers!”* (Jer. 4:31)

In these contexts, the language conveys vulnerability and defilement. In the more positive settings, the language can be quite up-beat. Here is an example, later cited in the New Testament: *Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem! Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.* (Zech 9:9; see Mt 21:5; Jn 12:15)

This refers to a future restoration and the joy that it will bring. The beginnings of such a positive note are found already in Is 52: *Shake yourself from the dust, rise up, O captive Jerusalem; loose the bonds from your neck, O captive daughter Zion!* (Is 52:2)

(ii) Marriage symbolism for God's faithfulness to Israel. At this stage, all of Is 62 should really be read.

(iii) Redeemed of the Lord: in using this expression, Third Isaiah picks up a major theme of Deutero-Is 40-55 (43:1; 44:22-23; 48:20; 52:9). For Second Isaiah, this redemption had already begun in the exile and is to be completed by the return of the deportees. God is also called a redeemer in these passages: Is 41:14; 43:14; 44:6; 47:4; 48:17; 49:7, 26; 54:5, 8). In Third Isaiah, God is called redeemer three times (Is 59:20; 60:16; 63:16).

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 11 The word used for proclaim means to cause to hear (cf. the *Shema Yisrael*) and is found frequent in Isaiah 40-66 (Is 41:22, 26; 42:2, 9; 43:9, 12; 44:3; 45:21; 48:3, 5-6, 20; 52:7; 58:4; 62:11). This proclamation is to the whole world—a little exaggeration in the context—but not untypical of Isaiah 40-66 (Is 42:10; 43:6; 48:20; 49:6; 62:11). Recompense is a positive statement of the earlier expression: “Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid, that she has received from the Lord's

hand double for all her sins.” (Is 40:2)

Verse 12 The Holy People: the force of this “title” becomes apparent when one reads Lev 17-26, the so-called Holiness Code. In that portion of the book, Israel is repeatedly called to be holy as YHWH is holy (for example, 19:2; 20:7-8, 26; 21:8, 23; 22:9, 16, 33). This holiness of the people challenges another tradition that would confine holiness to the sanctuary. In this view, the holiness of the people is achieved both through ritual and social practices. One text may serve to illustrate: “Consecrate yourselves therefore, and be holy; for I am the Lord your God. Keep my statutes, and observe them; I am the Lord; I sanctify you.” (Lev 20:7-8) Remote as Leviticus may seem, it is part of the foundation of Vatican II's teaching on the church as the people of God. The import of “sought out” can best be felt by reading Song of Songs 3:1-2, 5:5. The other metaphors—redeemed and not forsaken—were explored a little above. It becomes evident that this apparently slight reading is full of resonance and is really very appropriate for the feast of Christmas.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. “Salvation” is one of those words we use in church circles. It might be useful to go back to any experience of your own where you felt “saved”. Examples could be coming through a health crisis, restoring a fractured relationship, emerging from bereavement or depression. These experiences can lead to an understanding of salvation in Christ: freedom from fear of death, purpose in life, forgiveness of sins.

2. When we reflect on the church, it is good to be reminded that it is first and foremost the people of God, even “the holy people” of God. Through these difficult times, there is great life and hope in the continued fidelity and extraordinary commitment of the “ordinary” faithful. Time for prayer of praise and thanks!

PRAYER

Loving shepherd of the sheep, always seeking the lost and strayed, today, let us hear again your good news of salvation; touch our hearts that we may know afresh your love for us in Jesus Christ, your Son, 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