

HEARERS OF THE WORD



Acts 15:1-2, 22-29; Psalm 67 (66); Apoc 21:10-14, 22-23; John 14:23-29

Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you; I do not give it to you as the world does.

John 14:22 *Judas (not Iscariot) said to Jesus, "Lord, how is it that you will reveal yourself to us, and not to the world?"* 23 Jesus answered him, "Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them. 24 Whoever does not love me does not keep my words; and the word that you hear is not mine, but is from the Father who sent me.

25 "I have said these things to you while I am still with you. 26 But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you.

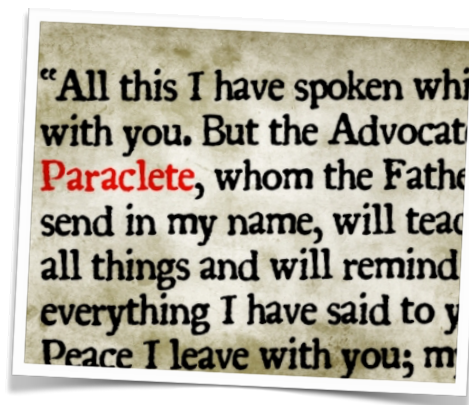
27 Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid. 28 You heard me say to you, 'I am going away, and I am coming to you.' If you loved me, you would rejoice that I am going to the Father, because the Father is greater than I. 29 And now I have told you this before it occurs, so that when it does occur, you may believe."

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

This is part of a longer speech in John 14-17, where Jesus prepares his disciples for his absence. It takes place at the Last Supper and corresponds in the Fourth Gospel to the shorter speeches at the Lord's Supper in the other three Gospels. The opening verse has been added to give the context.

KIND OF WRITING

This belongs to the literary category of Farewell Discourse. The common situation in almost all of these instances is that of a prominent person who gathers his followers (children, disciples, or the entire nation of Israel) just before his death or departure to give them final instructions, which will help them after



he is gone. In our passage, Jesus prepares the disciples for this absence (i) by the commandment of love; (ii) by the promise of the Advocate, the Holy Spirit; (iii) by the gift of peace; (iv) by an invitation to rejoice that he departs; (v) by informing them beforehand. As usual in the Fourth Gospel, we are not dealing with a transcript, but with a profound meditation on Christian life in the period after the resurrection, placed on the lips of Jesus by the author. These are really the present gifts of the Risen Lord, present in the community.

OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND

(i) In the Old Testament, God's Holy Spirit is present in creation, inspires prophets and imparts the gift of Wisdom. This Gospel adds to these functions the roles of "advocacy" (*paraclete* = advocate) and "reminding."

(ii) Peace or *shalom* enjoys a high profile in the Old Testament with a distinctive range of meanings: physical well-being, fertility in family and crops, good relations with others. See Psalm 122.

(iii) One of the most common phrases across the whole bible is "do not be afraid". This is said to everyone who has an encounter with the transcendent. The Johannine form of this is "Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let

Thought for the day

There is a move afoot to replace church teaching on the just war with a more proactive doctrine of just peace. As Paul VI observed long ago, peace is much more than the absence of war. In a world riven by conflict, peace is a matter of discipleship and, at the personal level, a matter of deliberate choice even in the everyday conflicts of our ordinary lives. The prayer for peace goes well beyond praying for individualistic freedom from stress.

Prayer

O God, though the human race is divided by dissension and discord, yet we know that by testing us you change our hearts to prepare them for reconciliation. Even more, by your Spirit you move human hearts that enemies may speak to each other again, adversaries may join hands, and peoples seek to meet together. Amen.

them be afraid." Cf. Gen 15:1; 21:17; 26:24; 35:17; 43:23; 46:3; 50:19; Exod 14:13; 20:20; Num 21:34; Deut 7:18; Josh 10:25; 11:6; Ruth 3:11; 1 Sam 4:20; 12:20; 22:23; 23:17; 2 Sam 9:7; 13:28; 1 Kgs 17:13; 2 Kgs 1:15; 6:16; 19:6; 25:24; 1 Chr 22:13; 28:20; 2 Chr 32:7; Neh 4:14; Ps 49:16; Prov 3:25; Isa 10:24; 37:6; 41:10; Jer 1:8; 10:5; 40:9; 42:11; Ezek 2:6; Zech 8:13, 15; Tob 4:8, 21; 6:18; 12:17; Jdt 11:1; 1 Macc 3:22; 2 Esd 6:33; 10:55; Matt 1:20; 10:31; 14:27; 17:7; 28:5, 10; Mark 6:50; Luke 1:13, 30; 2:10; 5:10; 12:7, 32; John 6:20; 12:15; Acts 18:9; 27:24; Rev 1:17. (Pardon the completeness of the references, but it does make the point!)

NEW TESTAMENT FOREGROUND

There are usually three levels when reading the Fourth Gospel. (a) A "natural" level, often involving misunderstanding. (b) A higher level of perception, with a realisation that Jesus' words have a spiritual and existential reference. (c) A third level, which invites reading across the Gospel. It is characteristic of the Fourth Gospel that the text is highly self-referential. A look at these cross-references is a commentary in itself.

Keep my word

John 8:31 Then Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in him, “If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; 43 Why do you not understand what I say? It is because you cannot accept my word. 51 Very truly, I tell you, whoever keeps my word will never see death.” 55 though you do not know him. But I know him; if I would say that I do not know him, I would be a liar like you. But I do know him and I keep his word.

12:47 I do not judge anyone who hears my words and does not keep them, for I came not to judge the world, but to save the world.

15:7 If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. 20 Remember the word that I said to you, ‘Servants are not greater than their master.’ If they persecuted me, they will persecute you; if they kept my word, they will keep yours also.

17:6 “I have made your name known to those whom you gave me from the world. They were yours, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word.

The word that you hear is not mine

Jn 14:10; 5:19-23, 30; 6:38; 7:16-18; 8:15-16, 28-29, 38; 12:49; 15:15; 17:7-8:

The advocate will teach you everything

Jn 14:16, 26; 15:26; 16:7, 12-15.

Peace

Jn 16:33; 20:19-26.

The Father is greater than I

Jn 1:1-2, 12; 10:30, 38; 14:9-10; 20:17; 20:28.

ST PAUL

Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us. (Romans 5:1-5)

For the kingdom of God is not food and drink but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. The one who thus serves Christ is acceptable to God and has human approval. Let us then pursue

what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding. (Romans 14:17-19)

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. (Philippians 4:4-7)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 23 Home = “abode”, corresponding to the verb “abide”. In the words of the Fourth Gospel, Jesus is outlining the mutuality of indwelling which will mark the post-Resurrection period. “If you love me, you will keep my commandments. (John 14:15) If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in his love. (John 15:10)

Verse 24 The mutuality is available only for those who are obedient to the love commandment. Jesus mediates the word of the Father: “I can do nothing on my own. As I hear, I judge; and my judgment is just, because I seek to do not my own will but the will of him who sent me. (John 5:30) Then Jesus cried out as he was teaching in the temple, “You know me, and you know where I am from. I have not come on my own. But the one who sent me is true, and you do not know him. (John 7:28)

Verse 25 The tone is that of “farewell discourse” and the time is short. In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live. (John 14:19) Cf. 16:16-19.

Verse 26 Remembering and understanding later are part of the theology of the Fourth Gospel. Only in the light of the resurrection and by the power of the Holy Spirit (unique here in the NT) can true insight into Jesus’ ministry and identity be reached. See for example 2:22 or 20:9. On the Holy Spirit, see 14:15-17.

Verse 27 The special peace of the risen Lord is freedom from death and from the fear of death. See 14:1-7. In the biblical view, true peace—shalom—is enjoyed by those in continuing relationship with God.

Verse 28 The going points to death and resurrection—the ground of Christian joy (and peace). This Gospel teaches the

equality of the Father and the Son and at the same time the priority of the Father (as the parent-child metaphor suggests). The Son obeys the Father. (Heretics exploited this verse!) His “going away” is for their benefit.

Verse 29 Everything is done in this Gospel so that we may believe. See 20:30-31.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. Jesus seeks to reassure his followers in the face of his imminent death. Although he will be leaving them he promises them the gift of the Spirit. How have you been aware of the gift of the Spirit of God in your life?

2. Remember times of separation from a loved one through change of residence or other circumstances. How has the love between you been a support after the separation?

3. To his followers Jesus, promises ‘we will come and make our home with them’. Our God is not a distant God but one who lives in us. What has helped you to be aware of the closeness of God to you?

4. ‘Do not let your hearts be troubled or afraid’. When you have been anxious, who have been the Jesus people for you who were able to calm your anxiety. How did they do this? For whom have you been one who calmed anxiety?

PRAYER

Great and loving Father, your will for us in Jesus is the peace the world cannot give; your abiding gift is the Advocate he promised.

Calm all troubled hearts, dispel every fear. Keep us steadfast in love and faithful to your word, that we may always be your dwelling place.

Grant this through Jesus Christ, the first-born from the dead, who lives with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, God for ever and ever. Amen.

The holy city Jerusalem coming down

Rev 21:9 *Then one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls full of the seven last plagues came and said to me, "Come, I will show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb."* 10 And in the spirit he carried me away to a great, high mountain and showed me the holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God. 11 It has the glory of God and a radiance like a very rare jewel, like jasper, clear as crystal. 12 It has a great, high wall with twelve gates, and at the gates twelve angels, and on the gates are inscribed the names of the twelve tribes of the Israelites; 13 on the east three gates, on the north three gates, on the south three gates, and on the west three gates. 14 And the wall of the city has twelve foundations, and on them are the twelve names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb.

Rev 21:15 *The angel who talked to me had a measuring rod of gold to measure the city and its gates and walls.* 16 *The city lies foursquare, its length the same as its width; and he measured the city with his rod, fifteen hundred miles; its length and width and height are equal.* 17 *He also measured its wall, one hundred forty-four cubits by human measurement, which the angel was using.* 18 *The wall is built of jasper, while the city is pure gold, clear as glass.* 19 *The foundations of the wall of the city are adorned with every jewel; the first was jasper, the second sapphire, the third agate, the fourth emerald, 20 the fifth onyx, the sixth carnelian, the seventh chrysolite, the eighth beryl, the ninth topaz, the tenth chrysoptase, the eleventh jacinth, the twelfth amethyst.* 21 *And the twelve gates are twelve pearls, each of the gates is a single pearl, and the street of the city is pure gold, transparent as glass.*

Rev 21:22 I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb. 23 And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb.

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

Our reading from the Apocalypse comes to a resounding close with this tremendous vision, before concluding with prophetic sayings and the epistolary ending. The Apocalypse can be impenetrable, but this passage should speak easily enough.

KIND OF WRITING

Prologue 1:1-3
Epistolary prescript 1:4-6
Prophetic sayings 1:7-8

Visionary report 1:9-22:5

I. Epiphany of the risen Christ 1:9-3:22
 The seven messages 2:1-3:22

II. Vision in the spirit 4:1-22:5

The scroll with seven seals 6:1-11:19

The first six seals 6:1-17

The 144,000 7:1-17

The seventh seal 8:1-11:19

The open scroll 12:1-22:5

The woman 12:1-18

Chaos unleashed 13:1-18

End time vision 14:1-20

The seven bowls 15:1-16:20

Vision of Babylon 17:1-19:10

The last things 19:11-20:21

Vision of Jerusalem 21:9-22:5

Prophetic sayings 22:6-20

Epistolary concluding blessing 22:21

Our reading comes from the last major section and it comes as a relief, after all the wars, destruction and violence of the book. Properly, it begins with verse 9, included here, as are vv. 15-21. It is obvious why these verses were omitted but they do help us understanding better.

ORIGIN OF THE READING

The context is, as always, that of persecution or harassment on account of being believers. The writer has in mind always the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem. There is no need of a temple, a distinct "location" for God's presence, because God will be all in all (1 Cor 15:12:28). The writer also has in mind the destruction of the great Babylon (= Rome) and its replacement by another city, the new Jerusalem.

RELATED PASSAGES

And the one seated there looks like jasper and carnelian, and around the throne is a rainbow that looks like an emerald. (Revelation 4:3)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 9 V. 9 maintains the links with the previous upheavals. This angel was mentioned earlier in 15:1 (one of the seven bowls) and comes here to show the seer the bride of the Lamb (see 19:7). The bride contrasts with the whore in 17:3.

Verse 10 This "removal" of the seer parallels an earlier removal to view another city, Babylon-Rome (17:3). The high mountain is an echo of Ezekiel.

Verse 11 Ezekiel is in mind here: Ezek 43:4. The jewellery contrasts sharply with the decorations of of Babylon in 17:4, 18:12, 16. Cf. ...and they saw the God of Israel. Under his feet there was something like a pavement of sapphire stone, like the very heaven for clearness. (Exodus 24:10)

Verses 12-13 A clear reference to: *There shall be twelve stones with names corresponding to the names of the sons of Israel; they shall be like signets, each engraved with its name, for the twelve tribes.* (Exodus 28:21) Cf. Ez 48:30ff. and Eph 2:20.

Verse 14 Curiously, this is the only explicit mention of the apostles in the Apocalypse. Notice that the twelve tribes and the twelve apostles are both represented, thus uniting the God's first and second chosen peoples.

Verses 15-21 See Ezek 48:8-35 for the full background. *A row of carnelian, chrysolite, and emerald shall be the first row; and the second row a turquoise, a sapphire and a moonstone; and the third row a jacinth, an agate, and an amethyst; and the fourth row a beryl, an onyx, and a jasper; they shall be set in gold filigree.* (Exod 28:17-20)

Verse 22 Confining God to one people and one place is not part of the vision: God and the Lamb are present everywhere, always and to everyone. God's presence constitutes the Temple, which is the whole world. Cf. John 4:23-24.

Verse 23 This contrasts sharply with the darkness of Babylon-Rome in 16:10 and 18:23. For light in the Apocalypse, see Rev 8:12; 18:1, 23; 21:23-24; 22:5.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. The right offers a (future) vision to sustain the persecuted in the present. What "vision" sustains me?

2. Make your own list of the foundation stones and gates which are part of your spiritual life.

3. Light: such a beautiful phenomenon, living our gaze and directing our hearts to God.

PRAYER

God of light, ever present to us all, shine once more into the darkness of our lives. Let your Holy Spirit radiate hope and trust into our hearts, that we too may know your light and bring it to others. Amen.

The Council of Jerusalem and the letter to the churches

Acts 15:1 Then certain individuals came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.” 2 And after Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them, Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to discuss this question with the apostles and the elders.

22 Then the apostles and the elders, with the consent of the whole church, decided to choose men from among their members and to send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas. They sent Judas called Barsabbas, and Silas, leaders among the brothers, 23 with the following letter: “The brothers, both the apostles and the elders, to the believers of Gentile origin in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia, greetings.

24 Since we have heard that certain persons who have gone out from us, though with no instructions from us, have said things to disturb you and have unsettled your minds, 25 we have decided unanimously to choose representatives and send them to you, along with our beloved Barnabas and Paul, 26 who have risked their lives for the sake of our Lord Jesus Christ. 27 We have therefore sent Judas and Silas, who themselves will tell you the same things by word of mouth.

28 For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to impose on you no further burden than these essentials: 29 that you abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols and from blood and from what is strangled and from fornication. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well. Farewell.”

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

A key issue in early Christianity was how much of the Jewish Law should be retained and how much set aside. It exercised many figures and writers: Paul, Peter and James for instance.

It wasn't just a question of legalism (our issue?) but rather of identity. And behind the question of identity lay another question: was the Gospel really for all or just for one race and converts to it? Paul would take it even deeper: behind the question stands an understanding of the

cross: *I do not nullify the grace of God; for if justification comes through the law, then Christ died for nothing.* (Galatians 2:21) *Listen! I, Paul, am telling you that if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no benefit to you.* (Galatians 5:2)

KIND OF WRITING

Most of the reading is made up of a letter and from it we can learn a great deal. It follows the usual format of a letter, which is a bit different to ours. For instance, the sender is mentioned first. Also, because there was no public postal system (there was an imperial one, however), letters were borne by members of the community. These were not simply bearers, but had the job of explaining the content by word of mouth.

ORIGIN OF THE READING

Our story is the so-called council of Jerusalem. An earlier council is reported in Acts 11. Luke tends to airbrush out the tensions and a very different picture emerges from Paul's own account in Galatians. The NT quotations below attempt to capture the robustness of the exchanges and the urgency of the issue!

RELATED PASSAGES

Various versions of different gatherings may be found here: Acts 11:27-30 (the “first” council of Jerusalem; 10:9-16 (Peter's three-fold dream) and Galatians 2:11-14 (Paul's much earlier account of what transpired).

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 1 It takes place in Antioch. Jews from Judea are Christians claiming special authority.

Verse 2 It was a major issue, so a conference is set up to deal with it. At this point in Acts 15 both Peter and James make speeches, omitted in the lectionary and we jump to the conclusion.

Verse 22 A substantial embassy is set up to convey the Jerusalem decision to the church in Antioch.

Verse 23 The letter opening makes the addressees clear: believers of Gentile origin.

Verse 24 A needed preamble, detaching the senders from the “persons who have

gone out from us”.

Verse 25 Thus the embassy enjoys the authority of the conference.

Verse 26 The reputation of the apostles is affirmed.

Verse 27 Silas and Judas bear the letter and also have the task of explaining it.

Verse 28 The message: let's not make things harder for those who want to join us.

Verse 29 Food sacrificed to idols remained an issue as we learn from 1 Cor 8 and Rom 14. The risk was seeming to take communion with idols. In the Biblical tradition, the life is in the blood and so blood is forbidden as it non-kosher meat (“strangled”).

So, some of the food laws remain but circumcision is not insisted upon. In other words, the final decision was a compromise, in some contrast with the clarity of Paul in Galatians and Romans. Lest we think comprise a bad thing, it is at the service of the minimal conditions for communion and common life between Christians of Jewish and Gentile backgrounds. A not dissimilar discernment is offered in Romans 14.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. Conflict is normal within the community of faith. What is different is how we resolve conflict.

2. The desire not to make things difficult for those who wish to join us reflects teaching of Jesus: But Jesus replied, “Woe to you experts in religious law as well! You load people down with burdens difficult to bear, yet you yourselves refuse to touch the burdens with even one of your fingers! (Luke 11:46) How do I welcome people to the community of faith?”

3. Acting in communion with others is laborious but really the only way. What has my experience taught me?

PRAYER

O God of freedom: teach us how to be truly free that we may lay burdens on ourselves and fellow believers. O God of welcome: show us how to welcome those who wish to walk with us in faith in a spirit of love and service. We make our prayer through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, God for ever and ever. Amen.

THE LITURGY

Acts 15:1-2, 22-29; Psalm 67 (66); Apoc 21:10-14, 22-23; John 14:23-29

READINGS 1 AND 3

Although not especially linked, a certain pattern can be detected in today's first and third readings. The issues which arose in the Council of Jerusalem triggered a huge discernment, highly significant for the evolution of Christianity. We believe that in the process of discernment, we are not alone because the Holy Spirit will teach us everything.

THE RESPONSORIAL PSALM

Given the issue at stake in Acts, Ps 67 makes a perfectly fitting response.

SUNDAY INTRODUCTIONS

First Reading

Acts 15:1-2, 22-29

Today we wonder how much of tradition to hold on to and how much to let go of. This happened too in the early Church. The key principle is attractive and useful today: let's not make things harder for those who wish to join us!

Second Reading

Apoc 21:10-14, 22-23

Many of us know the song, *Jerusalem, Jerusalem, lift up your heart and sing*. It was inspired in part by today's reading. The writer presents an imaginary New Jerusalem, glittering with symbol and significance.

Gospel

John 14:23-29

Wouldn't it be wonderful to know true, deep and lasting peace? This is the very gift spoken of in today's Gospel, a gift of the Risen Lord to all who receive his Holy Spirit.

WEEKDAY INTRODUCTIONS

Monday 26 May

St Philip Neri, priest and religious

Acts 16:11-15

Today we hear of the founding of Paul's first community in Europe. Philippians shows just how warm relationship became after these simple beginnings.

John 15:26-16:4

The word "paraclete," strange to us, means literally the one who pleads alongside (someone). This is very like the Pauline vision of the Spirit helping us in our weakness. John's Gospel, however, adds two extra dimensions, noticed in today's Gospel: witnessing and remembering.

Tuesday 27 May

St Augustine of Canterbury

Acts 16:22-34

In biblical language, an earthquake symbolises the presence and action of God. In this extraordinary story, a truly astonishing reversal takes place.

John 16:5-11

Our Gospel reflects on the meaning of Jesus' departure (death): it signals and enables the gift of the Spirit in a completely new way.

Wednesday 28 May

Acts 17:15, 22-18:1

One expression from this reading is often quoted: *it is in him that we live, and move, and have our being*. The context for this marvellous affirmation is set-piece confrontation between Paul and the philosophers of Athens.

John 16:12-15

We are more aware, perhaps, than other generations of the importance of memory for our well-being and stability as individuals. It is important for us as believers as well and, fortunately, we are not alone. The Holy Spirit guides us not simply to retain the past but to live the future of our faith.

Thursday 29 May

St Paul VI, bishop of Rome

Acts 18:1-8

We may be tempted to think of Paul as operating on his own, but today we meet some of his wider team. Priscilla and Aquila were great supporters in friendship, hospitality and finance.

John 16:16-20

Our reading today touches a central part of the Farewell Discourse. This kind of writing acknowledges the transition of Jesus, so that he will no longer be with

his disciples as he had been. At the same time, it opens to up different relationship after the resurrection. The words of the risen Jesus to Mary Magdalen come to mind: Jesus said to her, "Do not keep holding on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" (John 20:17; NRSV adjusted)

Friday 30 May

Acts 18:9-18

Enemies try to get the governor of Corinth to act against Paul, but Gallio sees through the ploy and dismisses the case. Gallio was governor from winter AD 51 to spring 52, so this scene helps us to put a date on Paul's first visit to Corinth. Gallio's brother was the better known philosopher Seneca.

John 16:20-23

In the Gospel of John there is very little "tension" towards the future, unlike other New Testament documents. Today's reading, however, is an exception. We even find a standing metaphor from apocalyptic: labour pains. The insistent use of "joy" tells us what the Gospel writing has in mind.

Saturday 31 May

Visitation of the Blessed Virgin Mary

Zephaniah 3:14-18

The note of joy at the coming of the Lord anticipates today's Gospel, with its own note of joy at the coming of Jesus.

Luke 1:39-56

This gospel passage — like others in Luke — has inspired Christian prayer. In this case, the Hail Mary and the Magnificat.

