

HEARERS OF THE WORD

Isaiah 7:10-14; Psalm 24 (23); Romans 1:1-7; Matthew 1:18-24

Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel

Matt 1:18 Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. 19 Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. 20 But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. 21 She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” 22 All this took place to fulfil what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: 23 “Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel,” which means, “God is with us.” 24 When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife.

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

Advent 4 takes us back to the conception of Jesus. The story in Matt 1:18-24 (annunciation to Joseph) corresponds to Luke 1:26-38 (annunciation to Mary). The excerpt omits, for liturgical reasons, the next verse, which reads “but [he] had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.” (Matt 1:25) This is an accurate, if slightly awkward, translation.

KIND OF WRITING

(i) Communication in a dream: the clear prototypes are Jacob (and his famous ladder) and Joseph (with the coat of many colours). Otherwise, the Bible is hesitant, not to say suspicious, of divination by dreams.

(ii) Annunciation-type story: these stories show the following pattern. (1) Appear-

ance of an angel; (2) fear and/or prostration; (3) message; (4) objection; (5) sign. OT: Ishmael Gen 16:7-12, Isaac Gen 17:1-21; 18:1-12; Samson Jdg 13:3-21. NT: John the Baptist Lk 1:11-20; Jesus Lk 1:26-38. Our version in Matt is missing one element, the sign: the angel comes in a dream and there is a message. Implied are (a) fear—“Do not be afraid” and (b) an objection—Joseph wants a divorce and the angel somehow knows this.

(iii) Fulfilment of prophecy: five times in chapters 1-2, Matthew says the events described fulfilled something from the Hebrew Bible. The purpose is to underline continuity—i.e. God’s fidelity, even in the unexpected context of a Jewish-Christian community of faith.

OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND

(i) Joseph: the name Joseph reminds the aware bible reader of another Joseph in the book of Genesis. That Joseph was a dreamer, threatened by his brothers, who went down to Egypt. Because of his position, Egypt became a place of refuge for his family. The character of our Joseph and the narrative surrounding him all come from Genesis 37-50.

(ii) Divorce was allowed by inference in Deut 24:1-4, although no legislation formally permits it. The rabbis discussed “warmly” the conditions under which a man might divorce his wife.

(iii) Son of David: the relationship with David immediately calls to mind the guarantee and promise to the house of

Thought for the day

In a culture where God is, apparently, absent, it may sound strange to hear words such as “Do not be afraid” and “God is with us.” Such assurances are at the heart of our biblical faith from start to finish. Everyone who is anyone in the Bible is told not to be afraid. And the assurance “I will be with you” is found throughout starting with the very name of God in Ex 3:14, *I am who I am*. The God—in whom we live and move and have our being—is there all along, whether we are aware of it or not. Faith is the moment of discovery and recognition.

Prayer

You are with us always: you are with us in creation in all its splendour, in our fellow human beings in all their generosity, you are with us in the quiet where we are alone with you. Amen.

David made by the prophet Nathan in 2 Sam 7 and the prayer version of it in Psalm 89. David was the anointed shepherd king of Israel — language significant in Matthew. In the centuries before Jesus’ birth, people’s hopes focused on a restoration of the kingdom of David, as a mark of God’s continued faithfulness to his people.

(iv) Jesus is the Greek for Joshua, the name of Moses’ successor, who actually led the people into the promised land. The name comes Hebrew/Aramaic and means “YHWH is salvation” or “YHWH saves/has saved.” Messiah or Christ is not found in the Hebrew Bible pointing to an expected end-time agent of God’s salvation. That language and expectation developed in the last two centuries before the birth of Jesus.

Advent 1	Is 2:1-5	Ps 122	Rom 13:11-14	Mt 24:37-44	Wake up!
Advent 2	Is 11:1-10	Ps 72	Rom 15:4-9	Mat 3:1-12	Convert!
Advent 3	Is 35:1-6, 10	Ps 144	James 5:7-10	Mt 11:2-11	Be patient!
Advent 4	Is 7:10-14	Ps 24	Rom 1:1-7	Mt 1:18-24	God-with-us

(v) The promise in Isaiah 7:14 is read as a messianic prophecy. In its original context, this text promised a successor to King Ahaz, born in the normal way. The Hebrew says *‘alma*, which could be a young woman and/or a virgin. The early Greek version of the OT (the Septuagint) used the word “virgin”, taken up here by Matthew because it fits with his account of Jesus’ conception.

NEW TESTAMENT FOREGROUND

(i) Matthew is the only Gospel to give the meaning of the name Jesus. Intriguingly, he increases the occurrence of the name in the Passion Narrative from 10 to 17, perhaps because he wants us to hear the etymology and its meaning as we hear the story of Jesus’ death for us.

(ii) Emmanuel (lit. = God with us): as is well-known, the gospel’s first mention of Jesus includes this name and this Gospel closes with a final evocation: “And remember, *I am with you* always, to the end of the age.” (Matt 28:20)

ST PAUL

But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children. And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, “Abba! Father!” So you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir, through God. (Galatians 4:4–7)

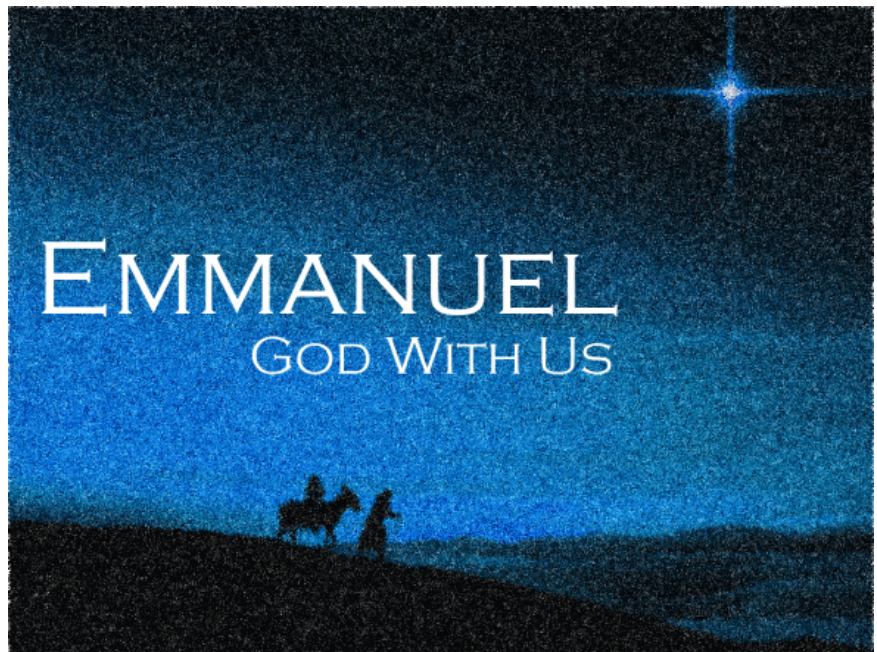
BRIEF COMMENTARY

In a discrete way, using narrative, Matthew achieves a tremendous theology of the child to be born: Son of David, the new Joshua, Saviour, God-with-us—all brought by the Holy Spirit and divine intervention.

Verse 18 The virginal conception of Jesus is a tradition which antedates both Matthew and Luke, as they both contain it independently. A conception outside wedlock serves to make that lack of human causality apparent. The Holy Spirit as the agent is found also in Luke.

Verse 19 In this way, the good character of Joseph is affirmed.

Verse 20 Annunciation type story details. “Son of David”—legal paternity is traced to the husband. “Do not be afraid” is one of the most common expressions across the whole Bible. Anyone who is anyone in the biblical narrative needs and receives this reassurance. The



fear intended is not emotional fright but, so to speak, ontological dread before the mystery of God.

Verse 21 Saving people from the sins is part of Matthew’s theology of the cross. That is why it increases the occurrence of the name Jesus in his Passion Narrative.

Verse 22 As elsewhere, a citation for proof of veracity and continuity.

Verse 23 Virginity (essential before marriage but a catastrophe if life-long) is a symbol of unrealised potential—exactly that period of longing after misappropriation and disappointment envisaged in the genealogy in Matthew as the setting for coming of the Messiah.

Verse 24 Joseph is always obedient to his dreams—see 2:13 and 2:19.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

As we move into prayer on the passage, we move from consideration of the mystery of how “God with us” was revealed to the world in the person of Jesus two thousand years ago, to a reflection on how we become aware of “God with us” now in our daily lives.

1. It took some time for Joseph to accept the fact that in Mary there truly was Emmanuel—God with us. God is with us now, but at times we struggle to perceive God’s presence. Where have you unexpectedly discovered the presence of “God with you”? Recall those experiences and give thanks.

2. Joseph was confused and uncertain about what he should do. It was difficult

for him to discern what his next step should be. Perhaps you have also had to make difficult journeys on the way to some decisions or commitments. Recall that journey and the moments when it became clear to you what was being asked of you. Give thanks for the angels who helped you along the way.

3. Mary bore Jesus within her, unseen to all, and unacknowledged by most. In Joseph she found one who believed in the treasure that she bore. We can be bearers of Jesus to others, and they to us. When have you been a bearer of Jesus to another? Who has been that to you?

4. The experience of having a gift that others do not see or recognise can be painful and isolating. Then someone comes, like Joseph to Mary, who gets to believe in what we have to offer. Has that happened to you? What was it like?

PRAYER

Eternal God, in the psalms of David, in the words of the prophets, in the dream of Joseph, your promise is spoken. At last, in the womb of the Virgin Mary, your Word takes flesh.

Teach us to welcome Jesus, the promised Emmanuel, and to preach the good news of his coming that every age may know him as the source of redemption and grace.

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

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ!

Rom 1:1 From Paul, a slave of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God. 2 This gospel he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy scriptures, 3 concerning his Son who was a descendant of David with reference to the flesh, 4 who was appointed the Son-of-God-in-power according to the Holy Spirit by the resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord. 5 Through him we have received grace and our apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith among all the Gentiles on behalf of his name. 6 You also are among them, called to belong to Jesus Christ. 7 To all those loved by God in Rome, called to be saints: Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ!

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

The reading might seem a strange one — the salutation from the letter to the Romans — but it is very rich. The surface link is the mention of David on all three readings. It is, in many ways, a n implied summary of the context of Romans and an anticipation of Paul's advice to them all, both Jews and Gentiles.

KIND OF WRITING

All the letters start with some such salutation, through none is as elaborate as this greeting in Romans. After all, Paul could have written "*From Paul to all those loved by God in Rome, called to be saints: Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ!*" The longer salutation incorporates a summary of the Good News, with its roots in Judaism, as well as presentation of the apostolate of Paul, sent, significantly, to all the Gentiles, including those in Rome.

CONTEXT IN THE COMMUNITY

The context is a split in the Roman houses churches, along the lines of Jews and Gentiles. The issue at stake is how much of the previous, Jewish tradition to retain. The Jews could claim a greater fidelity—and regard the Gentiles as failing to do what God asked through Moses. The Gentiles could claim a greater freedom in Christ—and regard the Jews as failing to recognise the consequences of the Christ event. A division along these lines, at the heart of the empire, threatened to core of the Pauline

Gospel: the extension of God's grace to all without distinction. Hence, Paul writes to a church he did *not* found.

RELATED PASSAGES

Greeting

From Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Sosthenes, our brother, to the church of God that is in Corinth, to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, and called to be saints, with all those in every place who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, their Lord and ours. Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ! (1 Cor 1:1–3)

Gospel

For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is God's power for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For the righteousness of God is revealed in the gospel from faith to faith, just as it is written, "The righteous by faith will live." (Rom 1:16–17; cf.)

For since in the wisdom of God the world by its wisdom did not know God, God was pleased to save those who believe by the foolishness of preaching. For Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks ask for wisdom, but we preach about a crucified Christ, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles. But to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ is the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength. (1 Cor 1:21–25)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 1 Slave (or servant) placed Paul immediately in a context of obedience which would appeal to the faithful Jewish Christians. Apostle: he claims his own authority as in the letter to the Galatians. Set apart: firstly, for a special responsibility to the Gentiles (see v. 5); secondly, "apart" (*aphōrismenos*) may be a play on word with "pharisee." Identifying with a group very committed to the Law would also appeal to Christians of Jewish origin. At the same time, "set apart" indicates something new and distinctive. Gospel: in the teaching of Paul this means the proclamation of the cross and resurrection. Occasionally,

Paul offers a short definition of sorts. See above: Rom 1:16-17 and 1 Cor 1:21-25). Cf. Rom 1:1, 9, 16; 2:16; 10:16; 11:28; 15:16, 19; 16:25.

Verse 2 Thus Paul affirms the Jewishness of the roots of Gospel, an important affirmation for the Jewish Christians. In Paul's view, the Gospel is not the teaching *of* Jesus but the teaching *about* Jesus with his death and resurrection at the heart of it all. See above Rom 1:16-17 and 1 Cor 1:21-25.

Verse 3 The Jewish descent of Jesus comes up for an impassioned mention in Romans 9:1-5 and throughout Romans 9-11. Descent *from David* links Jesus to God's fidelity to the Israelites *across time*.

Verse 4 In the language of later heresy, this verse can sound "adoptionist." It is somewhat unclear whether Paul is offering his own teaching or whether he is citing a formula current among the Christians of Jewish origins. The Holy Spirit is hugely important in Romans. NB Romas 5:1-5 and Romans 8.

Verse 5 Romans is written to a community which Paul had *never* been to, much less founded. Hence his need to account for his apostleship and his writing to them at all. He is called to *all* the Gentiles, who therefore include the Roman Christians of Gentile origin.

Verse 6 This generic claim takes in both Jewish and Gentile disciples. Paul will draw out the practical implications of belonging in Rom 12:1-15:6 and, in particular, the practice of tolerance.

Verse 7 In spite of their differences, all in the Roman house churches are loved by God—the very foundation of their being disciples in the first place. Note the repetition of "all." They too are called to holiness and for that they need grace (the sense of giftedness) and peace (the practice is reconciliation).

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. Paul offers a summary, with a special emphasis on the roots of the faith. How would you name the roots of *your* faith?

2. Both Paul and the Romans are *called* to holiness and apostleship. What is your own calling as a disciple?

PRAYER

God of every grace and blessing, help us to know the depth of your gift and love in Christ. Help us to recognise and set aside the difficulties which keep us apart.

She shall name him Emmanuel

Is 7:10 Again the LORD spoke to Ahaz, saying,
 11 Ask a sign of the Lord your God;
 let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven.
 12 But Ahaz said,
 I will not ask,
 and I will not put the LORD to the test.
 13 Then Isaiah said:
 “Hear then, O house of David!
 Is it too little for you to weary mortals,
 that you weary my God also?
 14 Therefore the LORD himself will give you a sign.
 Look, the young woman is with child
 and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel.
 15 *He shall eat curds and honey by the time he knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good.*
 16 *For before the child knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good, the land before whose two kings you are in dread will be deserted.*

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

The reading is a perfect match for the Gospel. At the same time, it ought to be interpreted in its own context and time as well as looking backwards in light the Christian use of the passage.

KIND OF WRITING

Technically, this is a sign narrative. In the bible, it is not usual for signs to be given without a specific request. The text is in two parts. Part I (vv. 10-13) is a dialogue about the sign. Part II (vv. 14-16) is the actual sign itself. The lectionary leaves out vv. 15 and 16, probably to close the reading with the word Emmanuel, God-with-us.

ORIGIN OF THE READING

As noted earlier in Advent, our reading is from first Isaiah, that is, chapters 1-39. The first section of Isaiah runs from chs. 1 through 12.

1-12 Condemnation and salvation; Davidic king; Assyria as God's instrument.

It is noticeable that the passage starts with “again.” This places it in the context 7:1-8:18, that is the Syro-Ephraimite war. The message in the early part of ch. 7 is a word from the Lord to resist the advice of battle-hungry generals and to sit tight. (See the map on this page.)

Take heed, be quiet, do not fear, and do not let your heart be faint because of these two smouldering stumps of firebrands, because of the fierce anger of Rezin and Aram and the son of Remaliah. (Isaiah 7:4)

If you do not stand firm in faith, you shall not stand at all. (Isaiah 7:9)

The oracle we are reading follows on as

a second assurance to Ahaz and this time it takes the form of dynastic continuity and fertility. The contextual meaning, therefore, is that a woman of the royal house will have a child and God's promise through Nathan to David will be sustained.

RELATED PASSAGES

Then King Rezin of Aram and King Pekah son of Remaliah of Israel came up to wage war on Jerusalem; they besieged Ahaz but could not conquer him. (2Kings 16:5) Cf. Isaiah 7:1-2.

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verses 10 This is a second word and a second encouragement to hold fast to the policy of loyalty to Assyria.

Verse 11 Prophets offer signs so that the recipient may know that God is fulfilling his word. For example, Samuel offers a sign to Saul:

Now when these signs meet you, do whatever you see fit to do, for God is with you. And you shall go down to Gilgal ahead of me; then I will come down to you to present burnt offerings and offer sacrifices of well-being. Seven days you shall wait, until I come to you and show you what you shall do.” As he turned away to leave Samuel, God gave him another heart; and all these signs were fulfilled that day. (1Samuel 10:7-9)

Verse 12 Why does Ahaz react so cautiously, even negatively? Because seeking a sign could be interpreted to mean lack of faith, a kind of testing of God. For example:

The people quarrelled with Moses, and said, “Give us water to drink.” Moses said to them, “Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test

the Lord?” (Exodus 17:2)

Do not put the Lord your God to the test, as you tested him at Massah. (Deuteronomy 6:16)

Yet they tested the Most High God, and rebelled against him. (Psalms 78:56)

So, Ahaz refuses on account of his careful piety.

Verse 13 It is made explicit that the Lord had been speaking throughout not directly but through Isaiah. The address changes to the second person plural. The plural fits the wider address “House of Israel.”

Ahaz is strongly condemned in Kings and Chronicles for dithering. He did weary his people, even at this early stage. He may also have wearied God by distancing himself from the religious reassurance / sign which would have helped. There is no hint that he himself was truly a person of faith.

Verse 14 In context, a miraculous conception is not in view. The young woman is unmarried and therefore the Greek translation “virgin” is not inaccurate. The birth, however, is a sign of God's continued presence and action. Hence the name: *immanu* means “with us” and *el* means “God.”

Verses 15-16 Opaque to us, these verses have a simple, political meaning. When the child grows up, the present crisis will be resolved.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. A child is always a blessing and at our own birth each one of us was a blessing to our parents. Children are a blessing to us too. Prayer of praise and thanksgiving for the gift of life and the wonder of being.

2. The reading invites us to see the hand of God in all that happens to us. He is our Emmanuel, God-with-us always, in whom we live and move and have our being.

PRAYER

God, giver of every good gift, origin of all we have are: to you we pray. We thank you for the wonder of our being; we thank you for the hunger of the heart that draws us to you; we thank you for your continued presence and action in our lives. Bless us as we prepare to mark the birth of your Son, Emmanuel, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

THE LITURGY

Isaiah 7:10-14; Psalm 24 (23); Romans 1:1-7; Matthew 1:18-24

READINGS 1 AND 3

The Gospel cites the reading from Isaiah and so the readings do match extremely well. The attentive reader will notice a small change of wording from “young woman” to “virgin.”. The Hebrew says young woman and the Greek translation (LXX) says virgin, as noted above.

THE RESPONSORIAL PSALM

Perhaps a whole, Psalm 24 (23) is not especially focused on the promise of the first reading. However, it does contain an affirmation of blessing and the response, which, given the nearness of the feast, fits the day: Let the Lord enter! He is the king of glory.

SUNDAY INTRODUCTIONS

First reading

Isaiah 7:10-14

Every child is a blessing and in our reading today the promise of a child to the house of David is evidence of God's continued care.

Second reading

Romans 1:1-7

Early Christians affirmed Jesus as a descendant of David because it marked continuity with God's earlier promises to the house of David.

Gospel

Matthew 1:18-24

“God with us” is the climax of this reading and, indeed, of the Gospel of Matthew: *And look, I am with you always; yes, to the end of time.* (Matthew 28:20)

WEEKDAY INTRODUCTIONS

Monday 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 political reversal.

Tuesday 23 December

St John of Kęty, Priest

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 be 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 foundation for the similar yet significantly different story of the 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.

Wednesday 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 OT. 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 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..

Friday 26 December

St Stephen, the first martyr

Acts 6:8-10, 7:54-59

The author of Acts devotes a great deal of space to the story of Stephen's death, much too long to read at Mass. The excerpted reading gives us the motivation for killing him and then moves immediately to his death. The aware bible reader will hear distinct echoes of the death of Jesus in Luke's Gospel. In this way, Luke reminds us that the disciple is not greater than the master.

A disciple is not above the teacher, but every disciple who is fully qualified will be like the teacher. (Luke 6:40)

Jesus was a prophet and suffered for his witness — his calling and his destiny are ours too.

Matthew 10:17-22

This remarkable passage — based on Mark but also in Luke — cannot really come from the historical Jesus but seems to be, instead, a reflection on the experience of the early church. Given the way in which Stephen was inspired by the Spirit, this is a wholly suitable reading for the day.

Saturday 27 December

St John, apostle and evangelist.

1 John 1:1-4

The first letter of John, written later in response to a new crisis, does not come from the evangelist but the later school, mentioned above. Our passage is an appeal to tradition (it echoes John 1:1-18) and experience (heard, seen, watched, touched). Given the critical context, the insistence upon joy is noteworthy.

John 20:2-8

We hear a part of a much longer scene in John 20, excerpted to profile the Beloved Disciple. This figure is partly historical and partly symbolic. He gets to the tomb first, precept because he is beloved. Likewise, it is the charismatic which counts and therefore “he saw and he believed.” The institution takes you only so far!