



We encourage you to look at the readings for the Fourth Sunday of Advent alongside this article:

First Reading: Micah 5:1-4

Responsorial Psalm: Ps 80

Second Reading: Heb 10:5-10

Gospel: Lk 1:39-54

Pause for Thought

Nicholas King SJ

Nicholas King SJ concludes *Thinking Faith's* Advent series by highlighting the ways in which the readings for the Fourth Sunday of Advent direct us towards the mystery we are preparing to celebrate, in which we have a part to play. In the frantic days that lead up to Christmas, it is vital that we take time 'to gaze attentively at this child, who will put all the darkness of our world'.

Next Sunday is the last one before Christmas, and we should now at last be starting to ask ourselves what he is like, this one whose coming we celebrate. Instead, you probably find yourself tearing out your hair as you gaze at an ever-increasing list of Things That Must Be Done Or Civilisation As We Know It Will Come To An End. So it seems good to pause and contemplate this Jesus whose birth we celebrate in the coming week. The readings for this Fourth Sunday of Advent may serve as a helpful platform for our contemplation.

The first reading singles out Bethlehem, the place of Jesus's birth, and insists that it is 'insignificant among the clans of Judah'. Bethlehem was of course also the place of David's birth, and we might recall the story in 1 Samuel 16 of David's original selection as successor to Saul: he was the one son of Jesse whom no one thought of; he was the youngest, and doing the child's job of looking after the sheep, not the man's job of training to be king. The situation in Micah's time (late 8th Century BC) is that Jerusalem is under threat, and its king, Hezekiah, has been publicly humiliated by the invading Assyrians (and you might distract yourself from planning the Christmas dinner just long enough to read 2 Kings 18:13-19:37, to gain courage, seeing what God can do). Into this alarming situation,



Micah proclaims what God is doing: from this tiny village of Bethlehem, 'there will come forth a ruler in Israel, and his origin is from of old'. In the prophet's original context, this referred to someone who would assert Judah's independence from Assyria, improbable as this may seem. The predicted liberator never appeared, however, and Christians, led by the evangelist Matthew (Matthew 2:5-6), have learnt to refer this text to Jesus, and it is the story

of Jesus we instinctively think of when we hear that 'the rest of his brothers and sisters shall return to the children of Israel'. So when Micah says of this one who is to come that, 'he shall stand and be a shepherd, by YHWH's power, and the name of YHWH his God', we think quite naturally of Jesus, to whom in their different ways both Luke (15:1-7) and John (14:10ff) apply the image of 'shepherd'. The upshot of the coming of this liberator, according to Micah is 'And this shall be peace'. Matthew and the early Christians were surely correct in applying this reading to Jesus, for it is the same God who speaks in the prophets and in the gospel. Micah was not, of course, looking ahead to the birth of Jesus, but no other ruler has so far emerged from that tiny town. So this Sunday, as we contemplate the darkened and unpeaceful world in which we live, we can repeat Micah's final words: 'he shall be peace'.

The psalm picks up that image of God as shepherd, and may have been the reason that Christians were later to apply that metaphor to Jesus: 'Shepherd of Israel, turn your ears to us, you who lead Joseph like a flock'. This is a charmingly intimate image for the one of whom the psalmist also says, 'The One who dwells on the cherubim, appear, arouse your might, and come to save us'. There is absolute confidence here that God can do it and is willing to do it; but the pleading is loud and insistent: 'God of hosts, please come back; look down from heaven and see: visit this vine'. The vine, we may recall, was an ancient image for Israel, object of God's hard-working care; but Christians also find here a reference to Jesus, as the poet sings of 'the man of your right hand, the Son of Man whom you have secured for yourself; John's Gospel picks it up by having Jesus say 'I am the true vine' (see John 15:1-10). In our name the psalmist makes what may turn out to be a rash promise: 'we shall not turn away from you again – preserve our life, and we shall call upon your name'; but the promise becomes easier to keep in so far as we can keep our eyes upon the one whose birth we are about to celebrate.

The second reading, from the Letter to the Hebrews, continues that Epistle's meditation on the significance of Jesus, whom it regards as 'the Real Thing'. At this point the author thinks of Jesus as the one who is wholly given over to doing God's will from the moment of his arrival in the world: 'You did not want sacrifice or offering...Look, I have come ...to do your will, O God'. That 'I have come' is taken from Psalm 40, and applied (without further ado) to Jesus. Nor are we invited simply to sit back and offer admiring applause at this obedience on the part of someone else; if we are to get Christmas right, we also have to set ourselves to do the will of God: 'by [God's] will we have been made holy through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ, once and for all'. Here, of course, we are being reminded that at Christmas we have also to remember Good Friday. The vulnerable child at whom we shall gaze in the crib, just a few days from now, is the one whose death we shall celebrate not many months into the New Year; and no reflection on Christmas is complete that does not include looking ahead to the Passion.

The gospel for this last Sunday before Christmas is the lovely story of the Visitation. And although you will say, on hearing the gospel next Sunday, 'Praise to you, Lord Jesus Christ', you may notice that in fact Jesus is hardly mentioned in this meeting of the two kinswomen, except as 'my Lord', on Elisabeth's lips as the child in her womb prompts her to prophetic exclamation. Instead, the gospel invites us to reflect on the two brave and Spirit-filled ladies, and to imitate them. There is Mary, a child of perhaps no more than twelve, in early pregnancy, and yet willing to make the hazardous journey from Nazareth to the hill-country of Judaea. We notice that she sets out 'in a hurry', and need to reflect that Luke is offering her as a model for us to imitate. When she gets there, she greets Elisabeth. Now of these two ladies, Elisabeth is undeniably the more eye-catching in this story; alert to John the Baptist's prompting, she is 'filled with the Holy Spirit', and interprets to Mary, and to Luke's readers, what is going on: 'blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb'. Note the confidence in her voice – that is something that you too may have, if you will also allow the Spirit to fill you in these days. Then she gives Mary the honoured and lofty title of 'Mother of my Lord', and concludes her prophetic speech with a word of congratulation to 'she who believed that there would be a fulfilment of the things spoken to her by the Lord'. Why so little about Jesus, just before Christmas? Because the mystery of the Incarnation serves to remind us that the Lord has 'no hands but ours, no voice but ours'. We have a grave responsibility upon us, and the only way to bear it is to gaze attentively at this child, who will put all the darkness of our world, and all our foolish anxieties, into their appropriate context. God is at work, and God will lighten our darkness, if only we will cease from frantic fretting and calmly gaze.

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