



Christmas Week I

Peter Edmonds SJ

Peter Edmonds SJ reflects on the readings for the first week of Christmastide.

*25 December, Christmas Day (daytime Mass): **Spoken through his Son***

Isaiah 52:7-10; Hebrews 1:1-6; John 1:1-18

'God has never said to any angel: "You are my Son, today I have become your father".' (Hebrews 1:5).

In our modern world, we choose different means to reach our destination. We may select to travel by road, by air, by sea. Likewise, we may approach the Christmas story by varied routes. The way selected for the first two Masses of Christmas is by means of the story given to us in Luke's Gospel which tells of the birth of Jesus in a manger in Bethlehem and the visit of the shepherds.

In this third Mass of Christmas, we are invited to tread different paths. The better known of the two offered is through the [beginning of the gospel of John](#) which begins its Christmas story before the beginning of the world. Less familiar is the opening of the [Letter to the Hebrews](#) appointed as our second reading. This is the solemn opening of a long sermon preached by an



unknown author to an unknown congregation, but so respected did this sermon become that it was included in our New Testament.

We are privileged to savour it today. We admire its majestic language and profound doctrine. We visualise the prophets of long ago and the angels worshipping God in his glory. We have

the work of Christ described in a nutshell: he made purification for our sins and has taken his seat at the right hand of 'the Majesty on high'. He fulfils the ancient scriptures. We hear the voice of God the Father speaking about the Son whose human birth we celebrate today. God himself joins in our Christmas celebrations.

Prayer

Father, you have provided us with many and varied ways to commemorate the human birth of your Word made flesh. May these enrich our prayer and improve the quality of our lives which we live in joyful and faithful response. We make this prayer through the same Christ our Lord.

26 December, St Stephen: *Faithful until death*

Readings: Acts 6:8-10; 7:54-8:1; Matthew 10:17-22

'Stephen was filled with grace and power and began to work miracles and great signs among the people.' (Acts 6:8)

Christmas celebrations are not over in a day. They continue for days afterwards and are all the better if they are enlivened by good company. Traditionally great feasts in the Church's calendar have been followed by 'octaves', solemn days that prolonged the joy of the original. Christmas week is such a week. This is illuminated by a series of persons and events which extend its significance.

On this first day after Christmas, we celebrate St Stephen. His name means 'crown'. Certainly, he won the crown of martyrdom. But he deserves a crown on other grounds. According to the Acts of the Apostles, in life he was full of faith and the Holy Spirit. He worked miracles and great signs. His wisdom expressed itself in a profound knowledge and understanding of the scriptures. In death, he showed that he was indeed a second Christ. Like him, he died forgiving his executioners. Christ died handing on his spirit to his Father. Stephen died offering his spirit to the 'Lord Jesus'. He saw him as the 'Son of Man', standing at the right hand of God. This was a traditional posture of prayer. Christ was interceding for him.

Stephen is honoured as the first martyr; two thousand years have passed and he has had many successors. In our own time, people still suffer persecution and worse for the sake of religious truth and commitment. Today we remember them and pray for them, especially in these days of Christmas. Stephen is praying with us.

Prayer

Father, many are the examples and models you have raised up in the Church for our instruction and imitation. May we learn from the life and death of Stephen both how to live in your grace and how to die, confident in your mercy. Through your Son, Christ our Lord.

27 December, St John: *He saw and believed*

I John 1:1-4; John 20:2-8

'We are writing this to you to make our own joy complete.' (1 John 1:4)

There are days when a whole nation smiles. This might be because of success in some sporting competition, such as a World Cup; it could be because of a happy event in a popular TV drama. This was the meaning of the word *gospel* in the secular world when the first gospels were written. Its religious meaning was captured by the prophet Isaiah when he spoke about the peace, good news and salvation brought by a messenger sent by God to announce the gospel. Today we celebrate the evangelist, the gospel writer we know as [John](#).

In the writings attributed to him, we celebrate the life and light brought to us by Christ. We owe to him the expression, 'God is love'. He reports the '[new commandment](#)' Jesus gave his disciples that they should love one another. Tradition identifies him with the 'Beloved Disciple' who reclined next to Jesus at the Last Supper, who watched beneath the cross of Jesus with Mary, his mother, and was the first to enter the tomb of Jesus on Easter Day and to believe. Some believe him to be the John who wrote the book of [Revelation](#) which describes the creation of a new heaven and a new earth at the end of time.

There is a world to be discovered in the writings that bear his name. His gospel concludes with a personal address to all who hear and read it. He tells us that he writes that we too may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing this, we may have life in his name. This must be our daily prayer.

Prayer

Lord, you have enriched and instructed your Church through the books of scripture. Teach us always to value these books, because in them, as the Second Vatican Council taught us, God the Father, who is in heaven, comes lovingly to meet his children and talk with them. Through Christ our Lord.

28 December, *The Holy Innocents: Meeting with shadows*

1 John 1:5-2:2; Matthew 2:3-18

'A voice was heard in Ramah, sobbing and loudly lamenting; it was Rachel weeping for her children.' (Matthew 2:18 [= Jeremiah 31:15])

In every age, including our own, tyrants use violence and murder as instruments of state policy. The Egyptian Pharaoh attempted to kill the infant Moses, together with other infant boys born to the Israelite slaves. King Herod reacted to the arrival of the Magi, looking for the 'King of the Jews', by taking their search as a threat to his own rule. He ordered the elimination of all the young boys who might prove to be such a king. This was the world into which Jesus, whom we venerate as king of peace, was born. Here is a shadow cast over the Christmas story.

[Where does God fit into all this?](#) Matthew tells us that he warned Joseph in a dream to take the boy to Egypt. Thus the child repeated the journey of his ancestors under Jacob into Egypt. Matthew also quotes the prophet Jeremiah. He cho-

oses the only sad verse in Jeremiah's 31st chapter. The chapter as a whole gives a message of hope, concluding with God's promise to make a new covenant with his people. The evangelist understood that this new covenant came into effect with the death and resurrection of Christ.

Our first reading addresses another shadow, the presence of sin in the Christian community. Despite all that Christ had accomplished in his death and resurrection, sin was still a reality and only a liar could deny this. But we are assured that we have a remedy at hand; Christ himself is with God, the Father, acting in heaven as our 'paraclete', our advocate. Here, too, is a message of hope, to blot out shadows in our lives.

Prayer

Lord, the story of the [Holy Innocents](#) tells us how rough and brutal our world can be. You came into this world. But you told your disciples that you have overcome the world and we live as people of hope, who rely on your continuous love and protection. Through Christ our Lord.

29 December: *Light and darkness*

1 John 2:3-11; Luke 2:22-35

'The night is over and the real light is already shining.' (1 John 2:8)

From the beginning of creation, humanity has struggled to cope with darkness and compared God and belief in God with light. In creating the world, God said: 'Let there be light'. We read in the first letter of John that God is light. In John's Gospel, Jesus proclaimed, 'I am the light of the world'. In Matthew's Gospel, he told his disciples that they were 'the light of the world'. Paul addressed his converts in Thessalonica as 'children of light' and those in Philippi he urged to 'shine like stars in the world'.

Our readings today both refer to light and put two models before us. The first, found in our first reading, represents every devout Christian. Such people live in the light, obey the word of Christ and live in Christ. They live the same kind of life that Christ lived. In them, the love of God has come to perfection, because the real light is already shining. The second, in our gospel passage, is Simeon. He lived in Jerusalem; he was an upright and devout man whose life was directed by the Holy Spirit. This Spirit brought him into the Temple. Meeting the infant Christ, he spoke of the salvation he was to bring as light, a light 'to enlighten the pagans and the glory of your people Israel'.

In the modern world, we easily forget the advantage we have over previous generations in coping with darkness. When power cuts come, we glimpse the struggles that our forebears had with [darkness](#). Thanks to Christmas, in the words of Isaiah, we who lived in darkness, have seen a great light.

Prayer

God our Father, may we shun the darkness that is sin and seek the light that is Christ, so that we do not stumble on our way. May we become a light for a world that so often prefers darkness to light. We ask this through Christ our Lord.

30 December, the Holy Family: Three Dreams

Ecclesiasticus 3:2-6, 12-14; Matthew 2:13-15, 19-23

'So Joseph got up and, taking the child and his mother with him, left that night for Egypt.'
(Matthew 2:14)

Every year, soon after Christmas, we celebrate the [Holy Family](#) – Jesus, Mary and Joseph – and we listen to a gospel passage that includes all three of them. Last year, we heard about the twelve-year-old Jesus in the Temple; next year we will hear about his presentation as an infant in the Temple. This year we hear how the family escaped into Egypt in flight from Herod's soldiers after the visit of the wise men.

The story falls into three sections, each marked by a dream of Joseph. A quotation from Hosea, 'I called my son out of Egypt', links this exile in Egypt with that of the people of Israel who went down to Egypt in the time of another Joseph. The words of the angel to Joseph in his second dream about 'those who wanted to kill the child' recall how the Egyptian Pharaoh wanted to kill the child Moses. Because of a third dream, Joseph takes his family to Nazareth. The words 'spoken through the prophet' about the Nazarene call to mind the great Nazirite of the book of Judges, Samson, who delivered God's people from the Philistines. Jesus delivered his people from their sins. In all three dreams, Joseph heard God's words and acted on them.

The Holy Family's journey to Egypt gives us a model of [paternal care](#) on Joseph's part. This Holy Family was a refugee family. May their exile turn our thoughts and prayers to refugees of our own day who struggle in foreign lands because of war and persecution.

Prayer

Father, help us to appreciate what we read in our gospels about the Holy Family of Jesus, Mary and Joseph. May we profit from their example of fidelity to your will; may our families benefit from their intercession. We make this prayer through Christ your Son, our Lord.

31 December: **We saw his glory**

1 John 2:18-21; John 1:1-18

'The Word was made flesh, he lived among us, and we saw his glory.' (John 1:14)

The Christmas story is one of the great stories of the world. It has inspired many an artist, is recorded in many a Christmas carol and told in many a nativity play. Children compete to impersonate familiar characters, and remember for years to come how proud they were to perform even a minor part like that of a shepherd or the innkeeper. They love to be part of the story.

But somehow, in the readings for our final Mass of the year, the familiar story and its well-known characters fade into the background. The [gospel passage from John](#) takes us back in time to before the world began, and tells us that even then, Christ was alive and active as the Son in the presence of God the Father. This Son came into our world as its light and its life. The Son identified himself with ourselves in

becoming flesh. He came to his own people, but tragically his own people rejected him. They failed to recognise that he was the word which reveals God the Father to us.

But this was not the end of the story because at his coming, John the Baptist spoke out as his witness on his behalf. And now that Christ, the Son, has returned to the Father, the Christian community witnesses in this gospel how it has seen and continues to see the glory of God. When he spoke to the [woman of Samaria](#), Jesus would exclaim: 'If only you knew the gift of God'. He says the same to us every year when we celebrate Christmas. His glory is there for us to see.

Prayer

Lord, in your time with us on this earth, you cured the blind and healed the deaf. May we at Christmas time have eyes to see and ears to hear the truths behind the Christmas story, so we may witness to the goodness of God that it contains. Through Christ our Lord.