

CHRISTMAS Midnight Mass

Year C



FIRST READING
Isaiah 9:1–6

PSALM
Psalm 96:1–3, 11–13

SECOND READING
Titus 2:11–14

GOSPEL
Luke 2:1–14

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PRAYER

Psalm 96:1–3, 11–13

O sing to the LORD a new song;
sing to the LORD, all the earth.
Sing to the LORD, bless his name;
tell of his salvation from day to day.
Declare his glory among the nations,
his marvelous works
among all the peoples.
Let the heavens be glad,
and let the earth rejoice;
let the sea roar, and all that fills it;
let the field exult, and everything in it.
Then shall all the trees of the forest
sing for joy
before the LORD; for he is coming,
for he is coming to judge the earth.
He will judge the world
with righteousness,
and the peoples with his truth.

READING THE WORD

First Reading Isaiah 9:1–6

The people who walked in darkness
have seen a great light;
those who lived
in a land of deep darkness—
on them light has shined.
You have multiplied the nation,
you have increased its joy;
they rejoice before you
as with joy at the harvest,
as people exult when dividing plunder.

For the yoke of their burden,
and the bar across their shoulders,
the rod of their oppressor,
you have broken
as on the day of Midian.
For all the boots
of the tramping warriors
and all the garments rolled in blood
shall be burned as fuel for the fire.
For a child has been born for us,
a son given to us;
authority rests upon his shoulders;
and he is named
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.
His authority shall grow continually,
and there shall be endless peace
for the throne of David
and his kingdom.
He will establish and uphold it
with justice and with righteousness
from this time onward and forevermore.
The zeal of the Lord of hosts
will do this.

Second Reading Titus 2:11–14

For the grace of God has appeared,
bringing salvation to all, training
us to renounce impiety and world-
ly passions, and in the present age
to live lives that are self-controlled,
upright, and godly, while we wait
for the blessed hope and the man-
ifestation of the glory of our great
God and Savior, Jesus Christ. He it
is who gave himself for us that he
might redeem us from all iniquity

and purify for himself a people of
his own who are zealous for good
deeds.

Gospel Luke 2:1–14

In those days a decree went out
from Emperor Augustus that all the
world should be registered. This
was the first registration and was
taken while Quirinius was gover-
nor of Syria. All went to their own
towns to be registered. Joseph also
went from the town of Nazareth in
Galilee to Judea, to the city of Da-
vid called Bethlehem, because he
was descended from the house and
family of David. He went to be reg-
istered with Mary, to whom he was
engaged and who was expecting a
child. While they were there, the
time came for her to deliver her
child. And she gave birth to her
firstborn son and wrapped him in
bands of cloth, and laid him in a
manger, because there was no place
for them in the inn.

In that region there were shep-
herds living in the fields, keeping
watch over their flock by night.
Then an angel of the Lord stood
before them, and the glory of the
Lord shone around them, and they
were terrified. But the angel said to
them, “Do not be afraid; for see—I
am bringing you good news of great
joy for all the people: to you is born
this day in the city of David a Sav-

ior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!"

HEARING THE WORD

"God's Grace Incarnate"

Christmas celebrates the coming of Jesus Christ into this world in a human body. However, on an even deeper level, this festivity celebrates the mighty acts of a forgiving and gracious God, acting for his people. The liturgy of the night of Christmas reveals that the birth of Jesus was, in fact, an act of God's supreme grace, manifesting itself in the incarnation of his Son.

The first reading, from the book of the prophet Isaiah, contains the prophecy of a glorious future for the people of Israel. In its historical setting, this prophecy alludes to the Assyrian destruction of the Kingdom of Israel in 722 B.C., describing it through frightening images of darkness and distress engulfing the land. However, Isaiah's words describe a profound change, a transition from darkness to great light, and from gloom to everlasting joy. This transition is marked by the birth of a child. The child in Isaiah's prophecy is no ordinary baby. This is the future saviour-king,

described through a series of splendid titles, that describe him, and the nature of his future reign. He is named "wonderful counselor, mighty God, everlasting father, prince of peace". These qualities could very well be a description of God himself. It appears that this new born child will be a faithful reflection of God, sharing God's qualities and acting on God's behalf. This child will be, in fact, God intervening in human history.

This new king's reign will allow the people to live in harmony with God, with each other and with nature. His coming will mark the fulfilment of all human hopes for a blessed and secure life, far removed from the dual curse of war and death. The Israelites called this future king "the Messiah", and New Testament writers will identify him later as Jesus Christ. In Isaiah's prophecy, we see this figure as God himself descending into the world, because of his "zeal" for his people. Appealing to God's "zeal", the prophet Isaiah emphasizes that God ardently desires his people to lead an uninterrupted, peaceful and happy existence. God will fulfil this desire, acting through a human figure, who will be a faithful reflection of God himself. Such an intervention on behalf of the people could be aptly described as an outpouring of God's grace upon a troubled world. An outpouring which will take the form of

a human child.

As one of the "pastoral letters", the letter to Titus is primarily concerned with practical matters of Christian life, such as morality and the good order of the community. However, in our passage, Paul lays the foundations for all Christian life, through allusions to two comings of Christ. First, he speaks of "the grace of God" which has appeared bringing salvation to all. Here, Paul obviously refers to Christ's entry into this world's history with the gift of salvation. Paul returns to the same theme in the final words of the passage, speaking of Christ who "gave himself for us that he might redeem us". Clearly, Jesus' coming into the world and his redeeming death were the acts of God's grace. The second coming of Jesus is the anticipated Parousia - Christ's return in majesty and glory at the end of time, with the gift of eternal life for his faithful.

Christians find themselves living between these two comings of Christ. The first coming, the redeeming one, has already been accomplished. The second one, the salvific one, is yet to be accomplished. Some theologians describe this state as living in "the already and not yet". Already redeemed, but still expecting the fulness of salvation, believers live in "blessed hope". As they await the Lord they must naturally conduct themselves in a manner corresponding to their calling. Renouncing impiety, and worldly pas-

sions, they adopt a lifestyle marked by self-control and uprightness, eager for good deeds. However, at the beginning of it all stands the incarnation of Jesus – an outpouring of God’s grace and the beginning of the life of “blessed hope”.

The Gospel passage brings together the themes of the first two readings in the story of Jesus’ birth as narrated by Luke. First, Luke situates Jesus’ birth in the historical context of the oppressive Roman empire. Augustus Caesar, the Roman emperor, decrees a universal census. Such censuses were carried out for the purposes of taxation. Luke also reports that the census caused a massive displacement of the people who had to travel to their ancestral homes. These are circumstances similar to those described by Isaiah – the Messiah will be born under the shadow of a hostile empire, which disrupts the life of the people with violence and oppressive economic burdens. However, God’s intervention in history takes place even in this hostile environment. By ordering the census, Augustus Caesar forced Mary and Joseph to travel to Bethlehem. As a result, Jesus will be born where the Messiah of Israel should be born – in Bethlehem. Ironically and unknowingly, the Roman emperor served the divine purpose.

In further fulfilment of Isaiah’s prophecy, an angel appears to some shepherds with a message declaring that the Messiah has been born. Just as in the prophecy, the Messiah is a child

humbly lying in a manger. But his lowly and humble appearance and state are deceiving. When the angelic host sings God’s praises and proclaims that God’s peace has arrived upon the earth, they imply that this child, Jesus, is indeed the “prince of peace” – he is the one who will bring God’s kingdom into the world. The angels also declare that this peace comes upon those “whom God favours”. Here, we find a connection with the second reading and with Paul’s description of Jesus as God’s grace incarnate. God’s grace, synonymous with God’s favour, is bestowed upon the faithful through the child who has been born. Jesus’ arrival in the world initiates the time of humanity’s restoration. A restoration which will be the work of God’s grace working through his Messiah, Jesus.

While rejoicing over the birth of a child, Christmas in fact commemorates a supreme act of God’s grace poured upon the world. This grace is meant to restore, redeem, and, ultimately, to save the people. The prophet Isaiah looked to the birth of a royal child as a turning point in the destiny of his people. Paul wrote about the coming of Christ as an act of God’s grace that forever altered the course of life and the destiny of believers. Luke showed that the birth of Jesus means that God’s Messiah and Saviour had begun his work of transforming the world and human history. Through Jesus, God’s grace was poured upon the world; Jesus indeed is God’s grace incarnate. His arrival

brings peace to those who receive him, for he truly is God’s grace made tangible in human form. A fitting response to God’s grace in Jesus would be to join with the psalmist in a joyful celebration saying, “O sing to the Lord, a new song, sing to the Lord, all the earth. Sing to the Lord, bless his name; tell of his salvation from day to day.”

LISTENING TO THE WORD OF GOD

In our childhood days one of the popular topics for essays many of us had to write, either as a class test or homework, was, “The happiest day of my life”. The topic presupposes that there are some unforgettable pleasant events in our lives. At age 6, I recall writing on how I went to a friend’s party, ate rice and chicken and had a soft drink. Eating rice and chicken and having a free soft drink in the early 1980s, at a time when Ghana was gradually recovering from a severe famine, was very significant for me. I recalled that event in my essay as the happiest day of my life.

Growing up, however, I have come to realise that there is something much greater in life, something that brings more happiness than rice and chicken – it is God’s gift of Jesus Christ to every human being. This event, celebrated at Christmas is a celebration of God’s greatest gift, God’s grace incarnate.

An unknown author wisely used the word G.R.A.C.E. as an acronym, defining it

as, “God’s Riches At Christ’s Expense.” An incarnation of God’s grace would therefore mean that now in Christ we have access to every blessing that heaven has in store for us. This blessing is not fleeting in character and does not corrode with the passage of time. It is priceless, it is the gift of salvation.

Yes, because of Christmas, we have been offered access to a brand new life. Christmas reminds us that God has not left us to grope in the dark. In Christ, we have found the light that leads us out of darkness. Such an event fills us with joy. This is echoed in the prophecy of Isaiah, “the people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; upon those who lived in a land of deep darkness a light has shone...You have brought them abundant joy and great rejoicing”. The joy of God’s grace incarnate is buttressed in our Gospel text, where the angel said to the shepherds, “I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people”.

In celebrating Christmas, we do not engage ourselves in an empty ritual. Rather, we relive the deepest expression of God’s love for us. God’s grace incarnate means that the Lord is so close that none of us should ever accommodate a feeling of helplessness. Help is available for anyone who is willing to receive it. An African, St. Augustine, rightly said, “God is closer to us

than we are to ourselves.” That is the essence of the incarnation. Christmas is an unforgettable moment in the history of humanity. The birth of Christ has changed the course of the world’s history for good. Therefore, this day qualifies as the happiest day in the life and history of humankind.

PROVERB

*“God
is closer to us
than we are
to ourselves.”*

St. Augustine

ACTION

Self-examination:

How have I been preparing myself for the celebration of Christmas?

Was my preparation reflective of the spiritual nature of this celebration?

Response to God:

The joy of Christmas overwhelms us, and with grat-

itude in our hearts we turn to God, thanking Him for bringing light into our individual and collective darkness.

Response to your World:

I will choose one spiritual practice, such as an hour of prayer or scripture reading to meditate and express gratitude to God for sending his Son as my savior and savior of the world.

The best way to express joy is to share it. As a group we choose to engage ourselves in some concrete spiritual and charitable works during this Christmas season and thereby ignite the flame of joy in the hearts of others.

PRAYER

*Eternal Father,
the birth of Christ your Son
fills us with immense joy.
Now,
in Christ,
we have access to salvation.
May the event of Christmas
deepen our love for you
and our neighbour.
Grant this
through Christ our Lord.
Amen .*