

## Have a Hearty, Spirit-filled Christmas!

### The Nativity of Our Lord – Cycle B – December 25, 2020

*Readings of the Midnight Mass:* Isa 9:2-7; Titus 2:11-14; Lk 2:1-14

*Readings of the Mass at Dawn:* Isa 62:11-12; Titus 3:4-7; Lk 2:15-20

*Readings of the Mass of Day:* Isa 52:7-10; Heb 1:1-6; Jn 1:1-18

*“And the Word became flesh and lived among us” (Jn 1:14)*

Prologue: 2020 being the Covid-19 year of sickness, separation, deaths, lockdowns and anxiety, worldwide, it is perhaps best to focus on divine love made manifest in ‘God’s Word becoming flesh and living among us’. God is with us in Jesus; and God’s Spirit never fails to give us hope and strength. One can reflect upon the priceless gift of Jesus, The Face of God, as well as the Holy Family—Jesus, Mary, Joseph—with a special focus on *Joseph* since Pope Francis has announced the ‘*Year of Joseph*’ from Dec. 8, 2020, to Dec. 8, 2021. Indeed, the mystery of Christmas, the ‘*Christ-Missa*’—i.e., God’s mission in sending His Son to save us—overflows into the mystery and mission of the Holy Family, which is a model for all Christian families.

### Three Signposts from Scripture:

1. *Readings of Isaiah regarding the Messiah:* are many. The prophecies of Isaiah—written over a period of two centuries spanning before and after the Babylonian Exile—are pregnant with hope and joy. **Isa 9:2-7** was originally a coronation anthem. Every new Davidic king was welcomed with the hope that he would be the ideal king. Such an ideal king would bring in an era of great happiness expressed in two ‘joy-full’ images: (a) of harvesters after a bountiful harvest; and, (b) of victorious hunters/warriors. The “for a child has been born for us, a son given to us” (v.6) refers to the king, who, upon his enthronement would rule as if he were God’s own son (see Ps 2:7). This prophecy would find fulfillment only in Jesus, the Messiah, true Son of God. **Isa 62:11-12** is written after the return from the Exile when the people suffer loss of their identity: both, communitarian and religious. The prophet consoles them, prophesying to this so-called ‘daughter of Zion’ (v.11, referring to Jerusalem) that “your salvation comes” but now not only for them but “to the end of the earth”. Thus, the “Redeemed of the Lord” have reason to be hopeful and happy. **Isa 52:7-10** is similar in tone to the previous prophecy. The bearer of good tidings who assures us: “Your God reigns” (v.7) has “beautiful feet”: a poetic way of expressing gladness. While the returnees from Exile are told: “Break forth together into singing,” even amidst “the ruins of Jerusalem,” they are informed that future freedom will not merely be a return from some exile, but that: “all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God” (v.10), foretelling universal salvation.
2. *Readings of Luke and John fulfilling Law and Prophets:* can be used as a kind of preface to the forthcoming feast of the Holy Family. While the readings of the previous weeks of Advent—especially from the gospel according to Luke—describe the extraordinary workings of *God’s Spirit* in the lives of very ordinary people like Zechariah, Elizabeth, John, Mary and Joseph of Nazareth, the gospel according to John deals theologically with *God’s Word* present from the very beginning of creation. In present times of the pandemic, it would help not only to reflect upon the persons and events of the Christmas story in a historical perspective, but also to see their theological significance in the whole plan of salvation—from creation where God’s word and spirit work in harmonious conjunction with each other (Genesis chapters 1 and 2) to the Incarnation, where God’s “Word becomes flesh” to live with us. Seen in the larger landscape of God’s providential functioning in our lives, we are able to make meaning out of totally

unexpected events like the Covid-19 pandemic. All the ups and downs, births and deaths can be seen as part of God’s loving plan; i.e., God becoming one of us, humans, that we might become more and more Christlike and godly. What we—especially the ‘least’ of our sisters and brothers—are enduring, God’s Son, Jesus, has endured in the startling circumstances of his birth in poverty, hardships, rejection, danger to life, etc.

3. *Paul’s Letters to Titus*—which are the second readings of the Masses of midnight and dawn—speak of the first and the second comings of Christ (see 2:11,13); as well as describe the salvation that Christ brings in terms of the interplay of human collaboration with divine grace (2:14). Titus was a Gentile convert of St Paul who became his faithful companion and fellow-missionary. Paul tells him that salvation is not merely meant for some exclusive ‘chosen people’ but for all people all over the world. This is “renewal by the Holy Spirit” (3:5), which God has “poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Saviour” (3:6). Thus, while the Incarnation is an act of God, totally gratuitous and unmerited by human beings, we ought to rejoice at becoming “heirs according to the hope of eternal life” (3:7). This is a reiteration of the traditional theme: ‘God becomes one of us, so that we might become more like God’, explained above.

**Covid Christmas Call:** Amidst the apparent helplessness and hopelessness of the Covid crisis, we are called to surrender our hearts to God, giving God not some-*thing*, but some-*one*: myself.

**In Lighter Vein:** The beasts at Jesus’ manger were overjoyed to have a godly guest in their midst. “I’ll take the holy family for a joy-ride!” brayed the donkey. “I’ll gift him my eggs!” clucked the hen. The cow moaned, “He’ll never lack milk as long as I live!” The shaggy sheep said, “With my wool, his mother will make him a coat!” Last, the little lamb said, “I’m ready to die for him. Lamb chops will be great for his parents to celebrate his birthday feast!” What shall I give him?

**Food for Reflection:** Poetess Christina Rossetti wrote: “What can I give Him, poor as I am? If I were a shepherd, I’d bring Him a lamb; If I were a wise man, I would do my part; Yet what I can, I give Him—*give my heart!*” Give Him your heart—have a *hearty*, Spirit-filled Christmas!

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## Called to be God’s Family: Holy and Happy

**Feast of The Holy Family – Cycle B – December 27, 2020**

*Readings:* Sir 3:2-6,12-14; Col 3:12-21; Mt 2:22-40

Prologue: In continuation with the abovementioned theme, we can put the spotlight on the three members of the Holy Family—Jesus, Mary, Joseph—who are obedient to God’s Law/Word, live their lives according to the prompting of the Holy Spirit.

*“And the child’s [Jesus’] father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him” (Lk 2:33)*

### Three Signposts from Scripture:

1. The first reading from Sirach stresses the fact that the basic unit of social life is the family, which also ensures the perpetuation of the human race. This passage focuses on upholding the fifth commandment: “Honour your father and your mother” (Ex 20:12),

which carries a promise: “so that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you.” The idea of the keeping of the commandments as an atonement for one’s sins (vv.3,14) is prevalent in later Judaism. It could loosely be said that caring for one’s parents in their old age makes up for many other sins. Those who care for their aged parents experience blessedness not only as some external gift but in the very process of being caring and compassionate towards their family members most in need.

2. The second reading contains ethical exhortations to be followed for ensuring a fruitful family life. First, there is a list of virtues to be ‘put on’ — “clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience” (v. 12) — an echo of the vesting of candidates as they come out of the baptismal waters. Paul adds, “Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony” (v.14). Then, there is a ‘household code’ which lists the duties that members of a family ought to accept and undertake for the smooth running of family and society. Christ is upheld as the model of forgiveness.
3. The gospel passage of the presentation of Jesus in the temple can be seen from three perspectives. First, from a *doctrinal lens* it shows that Christ is fully human and undergoes all the processes which others of his time underwent, too. Thus, his parents take him to the temple to be presented to God and to offer the stipulated sacrifices. Second, from a *familial viewpoint*, Jesus grows in his identity and his humanity in the context of a *loving, caring family*. His mother, Mary and foster-father, Joseph, do everything according to the mandates of the Law and ensure that he is well schooled in the traditions of his ancestors. They “were amazed at what was being said about him” (v.33). The presence and the prophesies of the prophetess Anna and Simeon upon whom “the Holy Spirit rested” (v.25) and to whom “it had been revealed by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord’s Messiah” (v.26) add to the significance of this Spirit-filled event. Mary is forewarned that her heart will be pierced as she accompanies her son through the ups and downs of his life, mission and death. Third, there is a *prophetic and typological dimension* in this passage, for it is said, “The child [Jesus] grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favour of God was upon him” (v.40). These words are also said of two prophets before Jesus: i.e., Samuel (see 1 Sam 2:26) and John the Baptist (see Lk 1:80). While emerging from the line of prophets, Jesus is the greatest of them all since he is not only messenger but *is* also the incarnate message: God’s word made flesh. In Mary, Joseph and Jesus, then, we see the unfolding of a wonderful marriage between earth and heaven. In them, on the one hand, we get a glimpse of the workings of the Triune God, model of divine communion, and on the other, they map the pathways of perfection for human families to follow suit.

### **Three Models for Family Life Today:**

*Jesus:* God’s poor son takes upon himself littleness and frailty, being born at the periphery and submitting to the Law by being presented in the Temple according to Jewish customs and traditions. God’s fullness will emerge and shine from emptiness and self-surrender.

*Mary:* God’s graced one, receptacle of the Spirit, prepares herself to accompany her son and allow her heart to be pierced by whatever God plans for her, her son and the world. Virginal love has no limits, no conditions and seeks no reward but rejoices in loving.

*Joseph:* “found happiness not in mere self-sacrifice but in self-gift. In him, we never see frustration but only trust. His patient silence was the prelude to concrete expressions of trust. Our world today needs fathers.” [Pope Francis in *Patris Corde*, n.7]

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