

## The Advent Lectionary

### A Journey towards Christmas with the Bible

Welcome everyone, whether you are here physically, present via live stream, or watching at some later date.

The main focus of this talk is to introduce the Advent Lectionary. A few days ago we uploaded on the website [www.whatgoodnews.org](http://www.whatgoodnews.org) the readings and commentary for all the Mass readings throughout the season of Advent. What I want to do with this talk is to give you an idea of the shape of the lectionary. There are about eighty readings, though some of them might appear twice – once on a Sunday and once on a weekday. I also make connections with the responsorial psalm.

The lectionary was prepared at the instigation of the Second Vatican Council.

The *Introduction to the Lectionary* reads:

60. Throughout the liturgical year, but above all during the seasons of Advent, Lent and Easter, the choice and sequence of readings are aimed at giving us a deeper perception of the faith we profess and of the history of salvation.

**Advent varies in length.** There are always four Sundays, but Christmas Day can fall on any day in the fourth week. Interestingly, Christmas Day this year (2022) falls on a Sunday, a full week after the fourth Sunday. This means this is the longest Advent possible. As a consequence we shall be using all the readings provided for the Liturgy of the Word. Next year Christmas Day will fall on a Monday, the day after the fourth Sunday. This will be the shortest Advent possible. And therefore some days of Advent will be omitted (the final days of the period which ends with 16<sup>th</sup> December). Advent can be 28 days long at its longest, and at its shortest 22 days long.

Advent has two parts, two 'halves': the preparatory period, and the period of intense preparation for Christmas. This second period begins on 17<sup>th</sup> December and ends obviously on 24<sup>th</sup> December.

Special readings are provided for every day of Advent, three readings on Sundays, in the cycle of Years A, B and C, and two on weekdays.

One of the special features of Advent is the frequency of readings from the prophets of the Hebrew Bible, and particularly from Isaiah. It is important to know that the sixty six chapters of the book of Isaiah fall into three sections, usefully known as 'first', 'second' and 'third' Isaiah. Isaiah of Jerusalem lived in the 8<sup>th</sup> century. We read about his 'call' in the temple in Jerusalem in chapter 6, and chapters 1 to 39 relate to this prophet. But chapters 40-55 date to the exile in the sixth century, and chapters 56-66 are even later, with the probable involvement of several prophets.

Christians consider that Isaiah was the prophet of the Messiah. St Jerome goes so far as to call Isaiah 'not only a prophet, but an evangelist'. Actually, the material in Isaiah that looks forward explicitly to the coming of the Messiah is fairly limited. The book of Isaiah became

associated with the Messiah and with Advent due to the presence of a small number of texts which Christians saw as 'fulfilled' with Jesus. Isaiah 7 'the young woman will conceive and give birth to a son, whom she will call Immanuel'; Isaiah 9 'the people that walked in darkness have seen a great light...a son is born for us'; Isaiah 11 'a Branch will spring from the stock of Jesse....on him will rest the spirit of the Lord'; Isaiah 40 'a voice cries: prepare a way for the Lord in the desert'; Isaiah 61: 'The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, for the Lord has anointed me....he has sent me to bring the good news to the poor'. We could add to these texts the poems of the 'suffering servant', in chapters 42, 49, 50 and 52-53, – material read during Holy Week.

Let's now have a look at the distribution of the readings in the lectionary:

#### PART ONE THE FIRST THREE SUNDAYS

If we look at the readings for the **first Sunday**, Year A presents our first piece from Isaiah, from chapter 2: it is a 'vision' in which the prophet sees people from all nations going up the mountain of the Lord, 'so that he may teach us his ways, and we may walk in his paths.'

Year B of the first Sunday gives us material from the third Isaiah, including that Advent prayer 'O that you would tear the heavens open and come down' 63:19. The first reading for Year C, by contrast, does not give us an Isaiah text, but a text from Jeremiah which speaks of the Messiah. It uses Jeremiah 33:15: 'I shall make a righteous Branch grow for David.' Very similar to the text of Isaiah 11.

The tone is therefore set – we are reflecting on prophecy and fulfilment -we see in the events of Christmas the fulfilment of God's promise.

Let's turn to the **gospels for the first Sunday**. They are all taken from the so-called apocalyptic chapters of the three synoptic gospels: Matthew, Mark and Luke. This is when Jesus speaks about the coming destruction of Jerusalem, about the end of the world, and about how the faithful will be gathered into the kingdom. The 'second coming' or 'return' of Christ is a significant theme of the first half of Advent. Jesus says in Mt: 'Stay awake, because you do not know the day!' (24:42) And in Mark: 'Evening, midnight, cockcrow, dawn: stay awake.' (13:35) And in Luke: 'Stand erect, hold your heads high, because your liberation is drawing near.' (21:28)

As you would expect, the **second reading**, from St Paul's letters, will strike a similar tone. In Year A, the reading is from the letter to the Romans: 'Our salvation is near, the night is almost over, it will be daylight soon.' (13:11-12) Year B, from the first letter to the Corinthians: Paul gives his opening greeting and commendation: 'Christ will keep you steady and without blame until the last day, the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.' (1:8) Year C, first letter to the Thessalonians, 'may you be blameless when our Lord Jesus Christ comes with all his saints.' (3:13)

So the emphasis on the first Sunday is very much on the last day, on the return of Jesus Christ.

With the **second Sunday** the focus in the gospels is on the beginning of the ministry of John the Baptist. In Year A, Matthew introduces John who came preaching in the wilderness: 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is close at hand.' (3:1) Matthew points to the text of Isaiah 40, which he considers fulfilled in John's ministry: 'A voice cries in the wilderness, Prepare the way for the Lord.' Mark's account, read in Year B, gives us the very first words of that gospel, and quotes also from the prophet Malachi: 'I am sending my messenger before you, he will prepare your way.' Luke, in Year C, at the beginning of chapter 3, places John in the historical context, mentioning the emperor Tiberius, the prefect of Judaea Pontius Pilate, Herod the tetrarch, and others. So the second Sunday is marked by the arrival of John, the one who prepares the way.

What of the Old Testament readings chosen to accompany this gospel? In Year A it is one of those great messianic texts, from Isaiah 11: 'a Branch will spring from the stock of Jesse....on him will rest the spirit of the Lord'. The whole of the poem, all ten verses, are read, including: 'the wolf lives with the lamb....the infant plays over the cobra's hole....they do no hurt, no harm, on all my holy mountain.' We are invited to use our imagination about what the coming of the Lord brings.

Year B, not to be outdone, gives us Isaiah 40, the first words of the second Isaiah: 'Console my people....A voice cries in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord' which of course fits with the gospel about John the Baptist.

Year C is quite different, or so it might seem. It is from the book of Baruch, not in the Hebrew Bible, but found in the Greek translation, and attributed to Baruch, the secretary of Jeremiah. Peace is announced. There are links with Isaiah 40: the mountains will be levelled and the valleys filled. Jerusalem is told to stand on the heights and see her children returning from exile. The message of second Isaiah is taken up here, centuries later in the book of Baruch.

What of the second readings on the second Sunday? In Year A we hear Paul in Romans speaking of the 'encouragement of the Scriptures', and the 'God of perseverance' (15:4-5). Year B presents 2 Peter saying that God is not delaying, but being patient (3:9), and in Year C in Philippians Paul urges us to be 'innocent and blameless' 'for the Day of Christ' (1:10). So on this second Sunday, as well as introducing John the Baptist, the scriptures continue the theme of being ready.

The **third Sunday, known as *Gaudete*** takes up the theme of joy. The Isaiah reading in Year A (Isaiah 35) invites creation to rejoice: 'let the desert be glad....let the wasteland rejoice and bloom.' In Year B we go to Isaiah 61, and hear the text which Jesus uses in the synagogue in Nazareth (Luke 4): 'The spirit of the Lord is upon me, he has sent me to bring good news to the poor.' Then, in verses quoted from later in the chapter: 'I exult for joy in the Lord, my soul rejoices in my God'. Year C, once again, departs from Isaiah, and instead we have a passage from Zephaniah, contemporary of Jeremiah: 'Rejoice, exult with all your heart' and then, twice, 'the Lord is among you.' (3:14-18) So these readings from the prophets set the tone of joy.

The Advent theme of patience in the second reading for this third Sunday for Year A has the letter of James say: 'you too must be patient, do not lose heart, the Lord's coming is near.' (5:8) Year B has Paul in 1 Thessalonians 'always be joyful' (5:16), and Year C Paul in Philippians 'Rejoice in the Lord always, again I say rejoice.' (4:4)

The gospels on this third Sunday feature, as on the second Sunday, texts about John the Baptist. Year A narrates from Matthew the sending of disciples by John to Jesus to say 'Are you really the one who is to come?' (11:3) Seemingly John is perplexed by the preaching of Jesus. Year B gives us sections of the first chapter of the gospel of John about the Baptist: 'A man came sent by God....he was not the light ....he was a witness to speak for the light.' (1:6-8) And then, from later in the same chapter, part of the account of how priests and Levites were sent to John to interrogate him about his behaviour. His reply is: 'I am as Isaiah prophesied a voice crying in the wilderness.' (1:23) In Year C we read about how different groups of people, tax collectors, soldiers and others ask John 'What must we do?' (3:10-14) John replies to each group.

So, with this survey of the readings for the first three Sundays major Advent themes emerge: getting ready for the second coming of Christ, rejoicing, and the figures of Isaiah and John the Baptist.

#### PART TWO THE WEEKDAY READINGS UP TO 16<sup>TH</sup> DECEMBER

Let's take a brief look now at the weekday readings for this first part of Advent, which goes up to and includes 16<sup>th</sup> December. Of course there are only two readings on weekdays, and you would be right to suspect that Isaiah will take the first reading. Readings are from the first Isaiah up to and including the Monday of the second week. Then, beginning with Isaiah 40, readings from second Isaiah, but just for the next four days. Readings follow from Sirach, Numbers, and Zephaniah, and then back to the later chapters of Isaiah. Remember that some of these readings will be omitted when Advent is shorter.

The gospels for these weekdays are generally chosen to match the reading from the prophet. The nations going up to the temple of the Lord (Isaiah 2, Monday of week 1) is matched by the healing of the centurion's servant (Mt 8) and Jesus' words, 'Many will come from east and west.' Isaiah 25 'On this mountain the Lord will prepare for all peoples a banquet...' read on Wednesday of week 1 is matched with the multiplication of the loaves in Mt 15. Isaiah 29 healing of the deaf and blind is coupled with the healing of two blind men in Mt 9 (Friday of first week).

A particular feature of the gospels in this period is that from the Thursday of week 2 John the Baptist always features. There are eight such days, going up to the Friday of week 3. These gospels, taken from all of the four gospels, are not always easy to grasp. Why does John send messengers to Jesus to ask 'are you really the one who is to come?' (Lk 7, Wednesday of third week) What does the parable of the squabbling children in Mt 11, read on Friday of second week, mean? 'We played the pipes and you would not dance, we sang dirges and you would not mourn.' It seems to suggest that neither John nor Jesus was acceptable to the people. We even have a section from John's gospel chapter 5, on Friday of week 3, in which Jesus explains that John 'was a witness for the truth' and 'a light shining for

a time'. This final gospel is only read when Advent is really long, so that it may come as a surprise.

#### PART THREE THE FOURTH SUNDAY

Let's move on now to look at what we might call the '**second half**' of Advent, the more intense period of preparation which goes from 17<sup>th</sup> to 24<sup>th</sup> December. These days are marked by the use of the 'infancy narratives'. You will be aware that Matthew 1-2 and Luke 1-2 have stories of the births of John and of Jesus, and events preceding and following. In the days before Christmas we read Matthew 1 and Luke 1, because the narratives of the actual birth of Jesus, with which Matthew 2 and Luke 2 begin, are read from Christmas Day onwards.

On the **fourth Sunday**, which of course has three sets of readings, for Year A, Year B and Year C, the gospels featured are the annunciation to Joseph in Mt 1, the annunciation to Mary in Luke 1, and the visitation in Luke 1. Even in the annunciation to Joseph there is a natural focus on Mary, who is the fulfilment of the Isaiah text 'a virgin will conceive' quoted at the end of the passage. Mary is of course the focus in the two gospels from Luke, the annunciation and the visitation.

These Sunday gospels have corresponding **first readings**. Isaiah 7, read in Year A, gives us the context of the quotation in the annunciation to Joseph. 2 Samuel 7 in Year B speaks of the enduring nature of the 'kingdom of David' and connects with the words of Gabriel to Mary 'his reign will have no end.' In Year C we read from Micah 5, which speaks of the birth of a ruler from 'Bethlehem Ephrathah'.

The Letter to the Romans and the Letter to the Hebrews provide momentous **second readings**. The opening words of Romans chapter 1 speak of the Son of God as descended from David – this is Year A. In Year B – the closing words of Romans: 'Jesus Christ, the revelation of a mystery kept secret and now revealed to all nations' (16: 25-26). In Year C we read from Hebrews words of Psalm 40 which are placed on the lips of Christ as he comes into the world: 'Here I am, I am coming to obey your will.'

The focus of the Fourth Sunday is very much on the incarnation, and on the role of Mary.

#### PART FOUR 17<sup>TH</sup> TO 24<sup>TH</sup> DECEMBER

The Liturgy of the Word for the weekdays between **17<sup>th</sup> and 24<sup>th</sup> December** offer Matthew chapter 1 and Luke chapter 1. There are only two days when the gospel of Matthew is read: on 17<sup>th</sup> we hear the genealogy of Jesus ('son of David, son of Abraham') listing the 42 generations from Abraham to Christ. The Genesis 49 reading chosen to match the genealogy is the blessing of Jacob to the tribe of Judah, who is the fourth generation of Matthew's list ('Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Judah'). The annunciation to Joseph is read on 18<sup>th</sup> (also read on the fourth Sunday if it is Year A) and is accompanied by the reading from Jeremiah 23 about the Branch for David.

On 19<sup>th</sup> we switch to the gospel of Luke, and from then on we read the very lengthy chapter 1 (eighty verses), with the annunciation to Zechariah of the birth of John, accompanied by

the story from Judges 13 of the coming birth of Samson to the barren wife of Manoah. On 20<sup>th</sup> we read the annunciation of Jesus to Mary, and Isaiah 7 as our first reading (again readings which have their place on the fourth Sunday in Year B, and Year A for Isaiah 7).

The reading of the Visitation from Luke 1 on 21<sup>st</sup> is accompanied by a passage from the Song of Songs. Perhaps rather unfamiliar, this biblical book is made up of poems praising the love of man and woman. In our passage from chapter 2 first a woman, and then her beloved, speak. The woman yearns for the 'beloved' who is coming. There is an alternative reading on this day, from the prophet Zephaniah 3:14-18. Twice it is stated that 'the Lord is in your midst'. This reading is also used on the third Sunday Year C.

On 22<sup>nd</sup> the story of the birth of Samuel in 1 Samuel is followed by the song of thanksgiving of his mother Hannah, which takes the place of the responsorial psalm. Hannah's song has inspired Mary's *Magnificat*, which is the gospel of the day.

23<sup>rd</sup> and 24<sup>th</sup> focus on John the Baptist and give us the final parts of Luke 1: the birth and naming of John the Baptist, and Zechariah's canticle, the *Benedictus*. Malachi 3, 'I will send my messenger' is chosen to match the birth of John, and 2 Samuel 7 appears again on the morning of 24<sup>th</sup> to accompany the *Benedictus*.

The Advent lectionary is very rich and very complicated, and as I have mentioned there is a large number of texts. Please use the website recording to help you get a grasp of the Advent readings. If we can deal with 'one day at a time' it provides support for understanding Advent, and even, it's not too much to say, an introduction to the whole of Scripture.

#### PART FIVE THE 'O' ANTIPHONS

One more element to speak of is the 'O' antiphons, which feature from 17<sup>th</sup> to 23<sup>rd</sup> December. Their original place in the liturgy is as *Magnificat* antiphons for Evening Prayer on these seven days approaching Christmas. But they also appear as the *Alleluia* verse at Mass on those days.

So we have seven antiphons, which seem to date to about the seventh or eighth century. Some of this material is used in the Advent hymn 'O come, o come, Emmanuel'. The antiphons are inspired by Scripture, and were composed in Latin. The versions given in the lectionary are shortened, but on the website we provide the full text.

There is an easy Latin phrase to help us remember the antiphons. The Latin words 'ero cras' mean 'I will be tomorrow'. Christ is about to arrive. Christ is the future. At the darkest time of the year his arrival brings light and hope. Take the letters of 'ero cras' one by one and you can recall the Latin words which start the antiphons. But there is a snag: we have to take them from the end, beginning with the 's'. S stands for 'sapientia', which means 'wisdom'. 'O come, wisdom from on high.' A: is for 'Adonai', meaning 'Lord'. Adonai revealed to Moses from the burning bush. R stands for 'Radix', 'root of Jesse'. C is for 'Clavis', key of David. O stands for 'Oriens', the day star. R for 'Rex', meaning king, and finally E stands for Emmanuel, 'O come, o come Emmanuel'.

We have provided a sheet with the translations for your use.

Why is there no antiphon for 24<sup>th</sup>? Because Evening Prayer on 24<sup>th</sup> is no longer part of Advent.

In some liturgies there is another ancient antiphon *O Virgo Virginum*. Where this was used the 'O's had to start on 16<sup>th</sup> December.

*O Virgin of virgins how shall this be?  
For neither before you was there any like you, nor shall there be after.  
Daughters of Jerusalem why do you marvel at me?  
The thing you behold is a divine mystery.*

O virgo virginum quomodo fiet istud?  
Quia nec primam similem visa es nec habere sequentem. .  
Filiae Ierusalem, quid me admiramini?  
Divinum est mysterium hoc quod cernitis.

SET TO MUSIC Josquin Desprez (1450-1521)