



December 2017

Isaiah 52:7-10;

Psalm 98;

Titus 3:4-7;

Luke 2:1-20

1ST LESSON

A READING FROM THE BOOK OF ISAIAH

How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces peace, who brings good news, who announces salvation, who says to Zion, "Your God reigns." Listen! Your sentinels lift up their voices, together they sing for joy; for in plain sight they see the return of the Lord to Zion. Break forth together into singing, you ruins of Jerusalem; for the Lord has comforted his people, he has redeemed Jerusalem. The Lord has bared his holy arm before the eyes of all the nations; and all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God.

ISAIAH 52:7-10

PSALM 98

- 1 Sing to the Lord a new song, * for he has done marvellous things.
- 2 With his right hand and his holy arm * has he won for himself the victory.
- 3 The Lord has made known his victory; * his righteousness has he openly shown in the sight of the nations.
- 4 He remembers his mercy and faithfulness to the house of Israel, * and all the ends of the earth have seen the victory of our God.
- 5 Shout with joy to the Lord, all you lands; * lift up your voice, rejoice, and sing.
- 6 Sing to the Lord with the harp, * with the harp and the voice of song.
- 7 With trumpets and the sound of the horn * shout with joy before the King, the Lord.
- 8 Let the sea make a noise and all that is in it, * the lands and those who dwell therein.
- 9 Let the rivers clap their hands, * and let the hills ring out with joy before the Lord, when he comes to judge the earth.
- 10 In righteousness shall he judge the world * and the peoples with equity.

Lord God, we see your righteous rule in all your works, and we join our voices with the song of your whole creation in praising you, in and through Jesus Christ our Saviour.

2ND READING

A Reading from the Letter of Paul to Titus

But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Saviour appeared, he saved us, not because of any works of righteousness that we had done, but according to his mercy, through the water of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit. This Spirit he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Saviour, so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life.

Titus 3:4-7

GOSPEL READING

The Holy Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ According to Luke

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 governor 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 David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered 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 shepherds 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 Saviour, 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 favours!"

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us." So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

LUKE 2:1-20)

This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger."

It has often been noted that our God, the God of all, is a God of surprises. We find this in scripture. We also find it in how God acts in our own daily lives.

I think I can also safely say that God is a God of mixed messages — at least what we perceive to be mixed messages. On this holy evening, we have come to hear, to reflect, to be challenged, and to rejoice — all because of the love God has for God's people — and the mixed messages given to us in pure love.

If we look at what is described in solely human terms, we would say that the planning for the announcement and celebration of Jesus' birth was badly handled. Certainly, what we hear does not sound like the description of an ideal royal birth. There seems to be a lack of good planning.

It was a good thing that the lowly shepherds were the first invitees to the manger. Most other people would not know what to make of this birth. Their comments would likely have been rude in nature, at best.

Maybe it is time to take a fresh look at what we have read so many times about that holy night. There is much to which we can readily relate.

First of all, notice how everything seems to be happening all at once. Mary and Joseph's first baby is due to be born at any moment. We are told that the government of the day decided to register everyone at the very time Mary is full term. The government bureaucracy decided it would be best to have people go to their places of birth — thus causing all kinds of inconvenience and logistical problems for everyone but the bureaucrats themselves. Obviously, little thought or caring was given as to how such a census was going to actually play out in the real world.

Mary and Joseph get caught in all of this by having to spend the night in a manger with all that goes with it. Just imagine being there with the dirt, the smells and the various farm animals! Not a great place to have any child born, right?

So when is the Christ child born? — at night, when all is in darkness! And who is close-by to receive the announcement of this royal birth of God from God's angels? —> nearby Lowly shepherds! More than that, they end up being the first invitees to see the new born messiah.

It is not difficult to see why the nativity story can also be seen as a sermon from God. What do we learn then from this sermon from God to us? Overall, we learn a lot about the nature of God, and what is important to God.

We also learn about people. For example, we see that no matter how good or proficient people may see themselves as being, they/we actually always end up falling short of perfection. With the bureaucratic bungling of the census administrators we immediately see the problems that well-intentioned people can cause. We also saw the impacts such mishandling can cause for other folk.

In the Nativity Story, we are also reminded that fancy surroundings are not necessarily indicative of the nature of the people enjoying the fanciness or lack thereof. Put in another way; seemingly inappropriate surroundings in no way diminish the importance of the people who find themselves in those surroundings. Jesus' true importance was not reduced or altered in any way by his birth in a manger — in fact it has helped to rivet this holy event in our minds for untold generations.

Companion to this is the way God brings our attention around to understanding the importance of all human beings. God affirms this by having the angels announce Jesus' birth first to the shepherds working in the fields. Shepherds in those days were generally looked down upon by most of society. God then extraordinarily sees to it that the shepherds are the first guests to come and revere the baby Jesus.

And speaking of the baby Jesus — the Christ child is not just any baby, but the most special baby in all of history! At the same time, the infant Jesus is symbolic of other babies, all precious in

God's sight, as they rightly should be in our sight. They are precious, yes, as human beings; precious also in their potential to help make the world a better place. God has a way of delighting in that which is small and in what may seem insignificant, and rejoicing in the potential for good they bring to the world!

This point is made even stronger when we hear of Jesus as the light of the world being born into the darkness and discomfort of that momentous night. Even as the messiah, the baby Jesus still had the basic needs of any infant. This adorable baby was not self-sufficient. Jesus, right from the beginning needed care; needed love. So it is that we hear of how he would be found: *wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.*

Further in God's sermon, we are given the example of the shepherds being so caught up in their profound joy that they: *...made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them.*

2000 years later, in our love and amazement of Christ, we continue to be encouraged to let other people know of our love for him and his importance in our lives. As we heard earlier from the Book of Isaiah: *How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces peace, who brings good news, who announces salvation, who says to Zion, "Your God reigns..."* Isaiah later posed the question of how are people to come to know about God if no one is there to tell them?

So it is that we continue to proclaim Jesus Christ and his good news for all people.

The world continues to need his message of unconditional love, of forgiveness, of grace, of healing, of peace! For God so loves us.

May we rejoice in our accepting with open arms God's extreme expression of love — God's gift to us of his Son Jesus Christ.