

Divergence on the Lectionary - The Feast of the Nativity I

First Reading

Isaiah 9:2–7

The people who walked in darkness
 have seen a great light;
those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness,
 on them has light shone.
You have multiplied the nation;
 you have increased its joy;
they rejoice before you
 as with joy at the harvest,
 as they are glad when they divide the spoil.
For the yoke of his burden,
 and the staff for his shoulder,
 the rod of his oppressor,
 you have broken as on the day of Midian.
For every boot of the tramping warrior in battle tumult
 and every garment rolled in blood
 will be burned as fuel for the fire.
For to us a child is born,
 to us a son is given;
and the government shall be upon his shoulder,
 and his name shall be called
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
 Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.
Of the increase of his government and of peace
 there will be no end,
on the throne of David and over his kingdom,
 to establish it and to uphold it
with justice and with righteousness
 from this time forth and forevermore.

Second Reading

Titus 2:11–14

For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and

godly lives in the present age, waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works. (ESV)

Gospel Text

Luke 2:1–14 (15-20 optional, italic)

In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria. And all went to be registered, each to his own town. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear. And the angel said to them, “Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths 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,
and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!”

When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us.” And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger. And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child. And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart. And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them. (ESV)

Comments and Questions for Discussion

If you've read the Divergence on the Lectionary for Christmas II or III, you'll probably want to skip the next few paragraphs. I thought it a good idea to begin the comments on I, II, and III with the same explanation of the origins and emphases of the three Christmas Masses, so that someone coming to any one of them would have the same information. I wrote this originally for Christmas I, so the other two copies and pastes have only small edits.

When I began to work on the lectionary readings for Christmas, after years and years of ministry and preaching on these texts every December, I finally asked myself the question, "Why are there three sets of readings? And why do they chop up the reading from Luke in that strange way?" I confess that I never once used the texts I or II from Luke without the optional verses on Christmas Eve, and if I'm honest with myself, I'd have to admit that I don't think I would do that even now that I know more. The theological reasons for having those two texts make some intellectual sense to me now, but they don't make narrative sense. And I always used III with the reading from John for Christmas Day. (I didn't ever allow a Christmas Day to pass without celebrating the Eucharist. I just couldn't, even if there were only a half-dozen of us a couple times.)

Here is what I learned when began to ask the question, "Why?" I am much indebted to a Redditor who got me started in the right direction when I asked "why" in the subreddit on the Revised Common Lectionary. He pointed me to an article on a Roman Catholic website that explained the development of three different Masses for Christmas Day and their different emphases that led to the selection of different readings.

That led me to read several other articles, always on Roman Catholic sites (why don't Episcopalians or other users of the RCL teach this?) that had much the same information, but they varied slightly here and there. I'm going to sum up what I've gleaned from reading all the different accounts of the origin and purpose of each different Mass, but leave aside the history. If you're keen to learn more you have only to Google "origins of the three Christmas Masses" and you'll find plenty of material. I will also append to the very end of this Divergence the material my Reddit helper posted. It's a pretty succinct summary.

The three Christmas Eucharists have three different points of emphasis, and as a result, so do the lections.

Christmas I is designed to be celebrated at Midnight, in the first hour of Christmas Day. It emphasizes the "eternal generation" of the Son, the idea that the Son was never *not* born. (To me this has echoes of Nicaea.) This truth was hidden from humankind for ages, and this hiddenness is symbolized in part by the darkness of Midnight. But this

truth was not hidden from the angels, and so the First Mass of Christmas was given the name, “The Angels’ Mass.” It is for this reason that the Gospel text for Christmas I stops with the announcement of the Angels and excludes the journey of the shepherds to Bethlehem to see the baby.

I’ll try to focus on that emphasis in this Divergence on Christmas I as we study together all three of the readings, but I want to mention the other two as well.

II is traditionally celebrated at dawn of Christmas Day. The coming of the sun, the coming of light symbolize the delivery from darkness that blessed humankind with the arrival in our temporal reality of the eternally generated Son. The revelation of the Christ Child to the shepherds when they arrive at the stable in Bethlehem represents the revelation to us all of the Son and so this Gospel text starts and ends with the story of the shepherds. And this Mass has become known as the “Shepherd’s Mass.”

III comes to us from a Mass celebrated later on Christmas Day. Sources vary more on the interpretation of its focus, some citing the celebration of the revelation of the Son in the human heart (as opposed to in history, I suppose) others say it is more a meditation on “the Mystery of Christ’s Incarnation.” This Mass seems to be most commonly called “The King’s Mass” but is also called by some “The Mass of the Divine Word.” I’ll try to deal with that when I get a third Divergence written for Christmas!

First Reading

While I don’t read it this way, I need to give a nod to the scholars who have studied our passage from Isaiah and decided that it is in reality a festival song for the coronation of a king (they seem to disagree on which king) that was written into Isaiah by later scribes. I have written elsewhere that I am quite able to see Isaiah as the author of the entire book ascribed to him, as I have a very different real life experience of prophecy than most biblical scholars. I don’t blame them for searching for explanations that make sense within their frame of reference. It’s all any of us can do. Is it possible they’re right? Yes. Do I choose to believe they’re right? No.

In the end, though, it doesn’t matter as much as it might seem to. For me the act of collecting Isaiah’s prophecies into a book and the process of assembling the books of the Bible into one larger book, both these are also inspired acts. However it was first composed, it is nested among the words of Isaiah now. To choose to accept that it came from a coronation festival doesn’t eliminate its prophetic value, though it does change and diminish it somewhat in my eyes.

Reading it as I choose to, the pattern of alternation between oracles of judgment and oracles of salvation is preserved in Isaiah 9. Our text is preceded by prophecies concerning the fall of nations to the north by the hand of Assyria and followed by judgments on Assyria. In the midst of all this is Isaiah's vision of the ruler who will be called "Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace." Do I think that Isaiah imagined this ruler to be a ruler like other human rulers, just better? Probably. I don't think he grasped the full glory of his vision.

This reading fits into our Christmas I readings because of the emphasis on darkness and being delivered therefrom. I think it also fits into the focus on the Son's "eternal generation" from the Father in that it speaks of the One who is to come in that Hebraic, prophetic perfect tense, what will be is already accomplished in God. This is certainly a truth worth meditating on. It seems to me that sometimes we get caught up in the temporal manifestation of the Son in Jesus and the glory of His Ascension while overlooking His presence before the Nativity. What the angels announced to the shepherds that night had been a part of their reality forever.

Second Reading

We read so little of Titus during the church year that a long exposition on its authorship doesn't seem fruitful. Let me just say that I place Titus among those pastoral epistles that are attributed to Paul, but not written by him. It's worthy of study on its own, if only as a cautionary tale of sorts, but that sort of detail doesn't seem to be worthwhile in this lectionary context.

What we have here from Titus is for me an echo of sorts of the kind of guidance Isaiah might have given following his vision of the One who is to come. For the author of Titus, Jesus has come, but the darkness has not been fully dispelled, and he writes in sure and certain hope of the coming of the Light in all its fullness. This theme seems to fit differently into Christmas I than Isaiah did. Isaiah speaks of the vanquishing of darkness as an accomplished fact, Titus seems still to look forward to it. This is surely one of the tensions of Christmas Eve. God has done all that needs doing to bring the world into light and yet we are not able to see it fully. Paul speaks of it as "seeing in a glass, darkly." The Midnight Eucharist symbolizes this by way of the candles lit in dark spaces, dispelling the darkness, but not fully. We still await the coming of the Day. It is as though this service still clings to some of the themes of Advent.

Gospel Text

We're back in Luke for Christmas! So when reading this for the purposes of study rather than worship, it might pay to keep some of Luke's concerns and intentions in the back of

our minds. Luke writes for a Gentile audience, but one that he sees as deeply indebted to its Jewish roots and beholden to its Jewish brothers and sisters. So he writes in a style that will feel familiar to the Greco-Roman reader, but with an emphasis on the Jewishness of the story.

And so our reading starts out reading like a popular history of Luke's time. He sets it carefully in its political context, but then makes sure to remind the reader that the reason for Joseph and Mary's departure from Nazareth to Bethlehem is grounded in Jesus' Jewish lineage, He and His father are descended from David. This is important I think in part because some Gentile Christians were beginning to look down on their Jewish siblings, in much the way that I described last week in my Divergence on Romans. ([3 Advent, Year A](#)).

Some readers of Luke would go on to say that the announcement to the shepherds is significant in that it shows some preference on God's part for the poor. I think that's pushing it a bit. The announcement to the shepherds is that there is "good news of great joy that will be for all the people." All the people. I personally think the intentional inclusion of the socially outcast shepherds is important inasmuch as they would otherwise have been last to hear, but I don't think they're favored, just included. Intentionally included, as they might well have been overlooked by the more powerful (which would have been almost everyone else).

But the emphasis in this lesson, in the context of Christmas I, isn't the shepherds, it's the angels and their announcement. The real punch-line of the story is their song, the song they'd already been singing for millenia and will continue to sing unto eternity.

"Glory to God in the highest,
and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!"

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Below is the appended explanation of the three different Christmas Masses I received by way of a kind Redditor (a user of the social platform, Reddit) and which set me on this course for the Christmas Lections.

It is a development in medieval Roman Catholicism. I found the following on a comprehensive Roman Catholic website:

A custom that reaches back to the early centuries of Christianity is the celebration of three Masses on the Feast of the Nativity. It was originally reserved to the pope alone,

and did not become universal until the end of the first millennium when the papal books of ceremonies had been adopted by the Frankish Church.

The first Mass originally was connected with the vigil service at the chapel of the manger in the church of St. Mary Major in Rome. There Pope Sixtus III (440) had erected an oratory with a manger, which was considered a faithful replica of the crib at Bethlehem. The pope celebrated the Holy Sacrifice about midnight, in the presence of a small crowd, since the chapel could not hold many people.

The public and official celebration of the feast was held on Christmas Day at the church of St. Peter, where immense crowds attended the pope's Mass and received Communion. This was the third Mass as it appears in today's Missals. Under Pope Gregory VII (1085) the place of this Mass was changed from St. Peter's to St. Mary Major, because that church was nearer to the Lateran Palace (where the popes lived).

In the fifth century, the popes started the custom of visiting at dawn, between these two services, the palace church of the Byzantine governor. There they conducted a service in honor of Saint Anastasia, a highly venerated martyr whose body had been transferred from Constantinople about 465 and rested in this church which bore her name. The whole Byzantine colony in Rome gathered at their church on Christmas Day for this solemn visit of the Holy Father. In later centuries, when the power and prestige of the East Roman Empire waned, the popular devotion of Saint Anastasia declined. The Station in her honor was still kept, however, and has been retained in Missals up to the present day. Instead of the original Mass in honor of Saint Anastasia, another Mass of the Nativity was substituted, in which the saint is now merely commemorated. This is the second one of the three Masses on Christmas Day.

As the texts of the Roman Missal show, the first Mass honors the eternal generation of the Son from the Father, the second celebrates His incarnation and birth into the world, the third His birth, through love and grace, in the hearts of men. According to the contents of the respective Gospels, people came to call the first Mass "Angels' Mass," the second "Shepherds' Mass," and the third "Mass of the Divine Word."