

Divergence on the Lectionary - The Feast of the Nativity II

First Reading

Isaiah 62:6–12

On your walls, O Jerusalem,
 I have set watchmen;
all the day and all the night
 they shall never be silent.
You who put the LORD in remembrance,
 take no rest,
and give him no rest
 until he establishes Jerusalem
 and makes it a praise in the earth.
The LORD has sworn by his right hand
 and by his mighty arm:
“I will not again give your grain
 to be food for your enemies,
and foreigners shall not drink your wine
 for which you have labored;
but those who garner it shall eat it
 and praise the LORD,
and those who gather it shall drink it
 in the courts of my sanctuary.”

Go through, go through the gates;
 prepare the way for the people;
build up, build up the highway;
 clear it of stones;
 lift up a signal over the peoples.
Behold, the LORD has proclaimed
 to the end of the earth:
Say to the daughter of Zion,
 “Behold, your salvation comes;
behold, his reward is with him,
 and his recompense before him.”
And they shall be called The Holy People,
 The Redeemed of the LORD;
and you shall be called Sought Out,
 A City Not Forsaken. (ESV)

Second Reading

Titus 3:4–7

But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that being justified by his grace we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life. (ESV)

Gospel Text

Luke 2:8–20 (1-7 optional, italics)

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

Introduction

If you've read the Divergence on the Lectionary for Christmas I, 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. And I'm too lazy to rewrite it to keep it interesting, so here's my copy and past from the Lectionary for Christmas I with only the tiniest of 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.

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.

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.” I’ll try to keep that emphasis in focus once I finish this introduction and actually get to writing the Divergence for Christmas II.

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

In the way that I found it necessary to give space to current scholarly opinion on the reading from Isaiah 9 in Christmas I, I also want to acknowledge that my reading of Isaiah 62 is not in keeping with the larger academic consensus on the dating and authorship of the last ten chapters of Isaiah, known as “Third” or “Trito Isaiah.” In seminary I learned that Isaiah was composed over a long span of time, first by Isaiah son of Amoz, (Isaiah 1-39), then by a school of prophets (descended of Isaiah’s disciples) or a single prophet during the latter portion of the Babylonian exile (Isaiah 40-54) and finally completed by another prophet or school of prophets who spoke on behalf of God to the people newly returned from the exile. Some scholars still prefer to see the second and third portions as being from the same pen during the exile, but almost all of them do not see it all coming from the Isaiah who prophesied to Ahaz.

The widely varying historical contexts of the earlier and later chapters make it easy to see why scholars have chosen to go down this path. As I said in Christmas I, I don't think the scholars' approach hurts the interpretation too severely, I see inspiration present in either scenario, but I think it impoverishes our appreciation of the power of real prophecy and the nature of a prophet's vision. I simply don't find it necessary to posit other authors to account for Isaiah's vision of a future far in his own future.

I do find it comforting to discover that a large swath of Rabbinic writing on Isaiah has preferred to maintain the integrity of authorship from beginning to end. The materials available to me (I really miss being close to a good theological library!) are all from the first half of the 20th century, so I can't really speak to recent Jewish thought on this, but even in the late 19th and early 20th centuries Christian and secular biblical scholars were generally given to dividing Isaiah up into two or three portions. It's nice to know I have good company.

Looking now at our text from Isaiah 62, I want to recall the liturgical reasons for selecting the texts we have for Christmas II. This is the Mass that would have been celebrated near dawn on the morning of Christmas Day. The emphasis here is on the joy of the revelation of the Son to humankind. The eternally generated Son (Christmas I) is now and finally visible to all God's children and the "Shepherds' Mass" reflects on that joyful mystery.

The passage from Isaiah 62 plays into this reflection on the manifestation of the Son to the world, especially in its final words.

"Behold, your salvation comes;
behold, his reward is with him,
and his recompense before him."
And they shall be called The Holy People,
The Redeemed of the LORD;
and you shall be called Sought Out,
A City Not Forsaken."

But as one article I read pointed out, for Isaiah, this is not really a Messianic prophecy. That is, it is not about a coming Davidic king. The One who is to come, whose "reward is with him," is the LORD, not a new king. Here Isaiah envisions a theocratic future in which God Themself reigns.

Of course, if we have our Christology right, that still fits with the birth of the Christ Child, who is none other than God Incarnate, inaugurating the Kingdom on earth. The coming of the sun at the dawn brings a light that was invisible to us at midnight.

From our earthly perspective, the sun at dawn still leaves shadows. Long shadows. We who live in the light of the coming of the Son also see shadows, sometimes long shadows, but that doesn't negate the fact that we now live in the light of day. Too often I find myself muttering "Yes, but," when I am called to stand in a place where I can be warmed by the light. I want to point into dark corners and say, "But the darkness! There's still so much of it!"

In those moments I think I hear my Savior's voice coaxing me into looking back into His radiant face. "We'll deal with that in time, Jeff. Right now you need a good dose of me." I think we all could stand to bask in the light of His Presence far more than we do, without thought or worry about the dark that has yet to be dispelled. If I may push a metaphor right to the edge, it is that time spent in His light that causes our faces to glow like Moses' did, and to carry that light then into dark places to illuminate them as well.

The sun has come. The Son has come!

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. (Yes, that's exactly what I wrote to introduce the second reading in Christmas I.)

Our reading from Titus for Christmas II seems more celebratory concerning what the coming of Christ has accomplished in us, "...he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy..." Our changed status before God, revealed in Jesus, manifest through His death and resurrection, this is what the author of Titus announces as the result of the inbreaking of the light into our darkness. As sunlight cleanses by destroying bacteria, so we are cleansed as we stand in the light of the Son's incandescent glory. As sunlight bleaches, so does He bleach away the stain of our sin.

Gospel Text

When I first began to write about the Gospel text for Christmas II I got carried away, swept up by the glory of the birth announced by the angels. What I wound up writing was better suited to Christmas III, so after re-reading it and sitting on it for a while, I started over. This is me, starting over.

“Divergence on the Lectionary” began as a Bible Study tool. Something for its readers to use to prompt discussion and deeper thought about the texts themselves. Trouble is, I’m a preacher too, and I know I get caught up in preaching from time to time. And that’s pretty much all I did with the text from Luke for Christmas II.

I said last week, I think, in the Divergence for 4 Advent, that some of these familiar, beloved texts that surround the birth of Jesus are so weighted with memory and meaning for me that they resist study. This seems especially true with regard to Christmas. So here I go, trying to break through that resistance and actually study the Lukan text.

Given Luke’s Gentile audience and his special concern for the Gentile church’s relationship to its Jewish forebears, this passage from Luke takes on some new hues.

It begins with the angelic announcement of the birth of Jesus with which the reading for Christmas I ended. Then it carries on with the decision of the shepherds to go and see what they’ve been told about. But it is the announcement I’d like to focus on initially. We who are the heirs of Gentile Christianity, who haven’t given much thought or time to the Jewishness of our faith, we are prone to want to read verse 10 as referring to everyone, to the whole world. “Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people.”

I don’t think that’s what they’re saying in that moment. While in retrospect we have come to know that the Gospel is a Gospel for all peoples, all nations, in this instance the focus is still clearly on “the people.” Singular. The Greek noun, “*laos*” is singular, and can just as easily be translated “nation” as “people.” That the announcement is good news for *all* the people is made clear by the choice of the shepherds as the first recipients. The angels anticipate the way that Jesus will choose to preach the Kingdom so frequently among the outcasts.

In the initial emphasis on the Jews as the recipients of the Good News, I find a parallel with Paul, whose first outreach in any city he visited was to the Jews first, and only after that to the Gentiles. That shouldn’t surprise us, as Luke was a traveling companion of Paul’s.

I am led to wonder too, at Mary's reaction to the news of the angelic apparition that was shared by the shepherds. Everyone was surprised, astonished except Mary, who "kept safe all these things, pondering them in her heart." I translated "*suneterei*" as "kept safe" rather than "treasured up" because, well, first that's how the word is translated both the other times it's used in the New Testament and also because I wanted it to get your attention. Why would Luke tell us that only Mary "kept safe" the angelic announcement of her child's identity.

I think there's a relationship between the angel's witness to Jesus' identity and that of the Magi in Matthew. Luke, writing to a Gentile audience wants to emphasize Jesus' identity in a Jewish context, and so he give us the story of the angels and the shepherds and the announcement for "all of the people (of God, the Jews)." Matthew, writing for a Jewish congregation that is no doubt wrestling with questions about the growth of the Gospel among Gentiles, gives his readers/hearers the story of the coming of the Gentile wise ones, to whom God had revealed the identity of the baby.

And Mary kept safe that announcement. That is Luke, explaining how we know about it. "Treasured" is certainly a treasured translation, but it may be a little too precious. Luke knew and used Matthew, and it isn't too great a stretch to think that some of Luke's readers might also. Given that, Luke might need to explain why his birth narrative includes an announcement that is so focused on the the Jews, an announcement that Matthew lacks.

Luke goes to considerable lengths elsewhere to validate the Gentile mission and the inclusion of all the nations in the purposes of God, but not in this instance.

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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."