

# The Nativity of the Lord (Christmas)

(Years A, B and C)

## Vigil Mass

<i>First Reading</i>	Isaiah 62:1-5
<i>Response</i>	For ever I will sing the goodness of the Lord.
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 89:4-5, 16-17, 27, 29
<i>Second Reading</i>	Acts 13:16-17, 22-25
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	Tomorrow the wickedness of the earth will be destroyed: the Savior of the world will reign over us.
<i>Gospel</i>	Matthew 1:1-25

Today the Church celebrates the great feast of the Nativity of the Lord—more commonly known as the feast of Christmas. And on this day, what we're going to do is we're going to walk through the second readings for each of the major Masses for the feast of Christmas. So we have the vigil Mass, we have the midnight Mass, and then we have the Mass during the day of Christmas. So just like I've done with the Gospels, where I've kind of walked through the readings for each of those major feasts, so too we'll look at the second reading for each of those celebrations of the Mass of Christmas.

And the first one, the vigil Mass, takes the second reading from the book of Acts. And it's Paul's famous speech at Antioch of Pisidia, where he basically gives a summary of the Gospel of the good news of the coming of the Savior through the line of David. So the lectionary for today, the first reading from the vigil Mass of Christmas, is Acts 13:16-17, 22-25. So we'll start there and read that together.

[Paul] came to Antioch of Pisid'ia. And on the sabbath day they went into the synagogue and sat down. So Paul stood up, and motioning with his hand said:

“Men of Israel, and you that fear God, listen. The God of this people Israel chose our fathers and made the people great during their stay in the land of Egypt, and with uplifted arm he led them out of it.

And then it skips down to verse 22:

And when he had removed [King Saul], he raised up David to be their king; of whom he testified and said, ‘I have found in David the son of Jesse a man after my heart, who will do all my will.’ Of this man’s posterity God has brought to Israel a Savior, Jesus, as he promised. Before his coming John had preached a baptism of repentance to all the people of Israel. And as John was finishing his course, he said, ‘What do you suppose that I am? I am not he. No, but after me one is coming, the sandals of whose feet I am not worthy to untie.’<sup>1</sup>

Alright, so let’s pause there with this second reading from the vigil Mass. Why does the Church choose this reading for the vigil Mass of the feast of Christmas?

In essence, I think it’s because it’s a nice summary of everything that we’ve been looking at during the season of Advent. So if you recall, during Advent season (the first Sunday of Advent), we begin by looking at the message of the coming of Christ, the *parousia* of Jesus, and then we begin quickly to back up to His first *parousia*, His first coming and the preparation for that coming that we hear from in the ministry of St. John the Baptist—his public proclamation of the coming of the kingdom of God and not just the coming of the kingdom of God, but of the coming of one after him, who would be greater than him, and whose sandals he is not worthy to untie...who (as Paul identifies here) is the Savior, the Messiah from the house of David.

Now, I think for most of us, when we think about the coming of the Messiah, we just think about the idea of a long awaited Messianic king who comes to bring

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations/quotations herein are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994.

salvation to the people of Israel. And that's, of course, absolutely right. But notice that one line there in Paul's speech at Antioch that jumps out—that God says:

...I have found in David the son of Jesse a man after my heart...

...and from his posterity, God will bring Israel a Savior. So throughout the Advent season, many of you may have actually had a Jesse tree in your home. And the idea of the Jesse tree is rooted in a prophecy from the book of Isaiah (Isaiah 11) that describes the coming of the Messiah as a shoot sprouting from the branch of Jesse's tree, which has been cut down and it's become a stump.

And so what Paul is saying here in his speech to the people at Antioch is that that long awaited shoot from the stump of Jesse, that Messianic branch from the tree of David, by which the kingdom of God will be established, and for which the people of Israel were waiting, is Jesus of Nazareth. He is the long awaited Savior. And as Savior and as king, He has to come—this is very important—He can't just come from anywhere. He has to come from the family and the stock of Jesse, who was the father of King David.

By definition, if you look at the prophets, over and over again, the future king who goes on to be called the Messiah, the *mashiach*, is not just any kind of king. He's not a king from the tribe of Benjamin like Saul was. He is a king from the tribe of Judah, from the family and the house of David, from the royal family.

So one of the things that early Christians in going about preaching the good news of Christmas, especially if they're in places like Paul is here, in Antioch where there's a large Jewish community. He goes into the synagogue. That's the Jewish community within Antioch. One of the first things that Christian evangelists had to establish was not just that Jesus was the Messiah, but that He was from the house of David, that He was part of the royal family. Because if He wasn't from the royal family, He couldn't be the true king of Israel.

So at this feast of the vigil Mass of Christmas, what Paul is doing is giving the *kérugma*, the proclamation, the good news that Jesus of Nazareth—the one who was pre-announced by John the Baptist and then who fulfills the prophecy of Isaiah

—is in fact the Savior of the people of Israel. He is in fact the long awaited Messiah from the house of David. He's the shoot from the stump of Jesse's tree. So that's the second reading for the vigil Mass.

### **Midnight Mass**

<i>First Reading</i>	Isaiah 9:1-6
<i>Response</i>	Today is born our Savior, Christ the Lord.
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 96: 1-2, 2-3, 11-12, 13
<i>Second Reading</i>	Titus 2:11-14
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	I proclaim to you good news of great joy: today a Savior is born for us, Christ the Lord.
<i>Gospel</i>	Luke 2:1-14

If we turn to the midnight Mass for the feast of Christmas, we have to leave the book of Acts and go to one of the pastoral epistles. This is one of those letters attributed to Paul—that unlike, say, the letters to the Corinthians or Romans—this one isn't written to a congregation. It's written to an individual. And this is the letter to Titus, one of Paul's coworkers. And it's a very short letter, but it's very rich. And the reading for the midnight Mass is from Paul's letter to Titus 2:11-14.

And once again, the second reading here is chosen with the *kérugma*, the pronouncement, the announcement of the good news of salvation. And this is what Titus 2:11-14 says:

For the grace of God has appeared for the salvation of all men, training us to renounce irreligion and worldly passions, and to live sober, upright, and godly lives in this world, awaiting 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 iniquity and to purify for himself a people of his own who are zealous for good deeds.

Okay, so why does the Church choose this reading for the second reading of the midnight Mass of Christmas? Well, remember, in the Advent and Christmas seasons, what we're doing is we're celebrating two *parouisas*—two advents: the

first advent of Christ, which is the coming of Christ in His birth on the feast of the Nativity, but then that first advent, that first coming is always also pointing us forward to the final *parousia*, the second advent of Christ at the end of time at the New Creation at the Final Judgment.

So in this passage, we actually see an allusion to two...precisely those two comings. The first one at the opening of the passage is the feast of Christmas or the advent of Christ at Christmas, when Paul says:

...the grace of God has appeared for the salvation of all men...

He's referring there to what we will refer to in the tradition as the incarnation. He doesn't use that language here. Here (it's interesting) Paul describes the incarnation not by emphasizing "the Word became flesh"—that's St. John's language from the prologue to the Gospel of John. But he uses a very Pauline way of describing the incarnation—that the grace of God appeared for the salvation of men.

And you'll know if you've read Paul's letters, one of his favorite words is *charis*, the Greek word for "grace." And it literally means a gift. So when Paul describes the mystery of the incarnation, he uses the language of the gift of God appearing among men. So rather than the Word becoming flesh, for Paul, it's the grace of God (in a sense) becoming flesh or appearing among men in the person of Jesus Christ.

And it's interesting here that the Greek word for appearance in Paul is *epiphanein*. We get the word "epiphany" in English from that. So there's a real sense in which not only is there a first advent and a second advent in the birth of Christ and in His second coming, there's also a first epiphany and a second epiphany, so to speak. There's an appearance of Christ, of the grace of God among men in the coming of Jesus in His birth, and then there'll be other epiphanies as well. As we're moving into the Christmas season and we begin to journey toward Ordinary Time, we're going to have the epiphany or the appearance of Jesus to the wise men. Epiphany is also used to describe His first miracle at the wedding at Cana.

There are these different epiphanies where the grace of the coming of Jesus, which is hidden, say under the appearance of His identity as a baby, is going to be manifest. It's going to be revealed, it's going to become visible, whether to the wise men on the feast of the Epiphany, or to His disciples in the wedding at Cana. But the first epiphany, so to speak, the first appearance of all, is the feast of the Nativity itself. It's the birth of Jesus, the birth of a Savior.

So Paul here is saying that the grace of God has appeared for the salvation of all men, and that what this calls us to is:

...to renounce irreligion and worldly passions, and to live sober, upright, and godly lives in this world, awaiting our blessed hope...

Notice here the same Greek word is being used—*epiphanian*.

...the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ...  
(Titus 2:12-13)

And here Paul seems to be pointing forward to the final epiphany, the second coming of Christ. And it's very interesting here that it's only on a few occasions in Paul's letters that Paul ever uses the word God (*theos*) to refer to Jesus. There's one passage in Romans, and this is another famous passage here. Now these texts are a little ambiguous, so some scholars will say that it's the appearance of our great God *and* the Savior, Jesus Christ—it's two persons. But you can also read it as "our great God and Savior"—two titles for the one person, Jesus Christ, who will come in glory at His second advent and who gave Himself for us...why?

...to redeem us from all iniquity and to purify for himself a people of his own who are zealous for good deeds. (Titus 2:14)

So the Church gives us here at midnight Mass—in the second reading from Titus—is a Pauline description of the mystery of Christmas. We're very used to the Johannine descriptions in the Gospel of John, the Word becoming flesh. This is Paul's description. Paul describes the mystery of Christmas as the epiphany, the appearance, of the grace of God who has come to us in the person of Jesus Christ

in His birth, and which will come to us in the epiphany at the end of time—His *parousia*, the second advent.

### **Midnight During the Day**

<i>First Reading</i>	Isaiah 52:7-10
<i>Response</i>	All the ends of the earth have seen the saving power of God.
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 98:1, 2-3, 3-4, 5-6
<i>Second Reading</i>	Hebrews 1:1-6
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	A holy day has dawned upon us. Come, you nations, and adore the Lord. For today a great light has come upon the earth.
<i>Gospel</i>	John 1:1-18

Alright, the final reading—well, the final second reading, if that’s confusing enough—is going to be from the Mass of the Nativity during the day, Christmas day Mass. And here we have a passage taken from the letter to the Hebrews. Now if you recall, almost all the second readings from Ordinary Time are taken from the letters of St. Paul. And many of them are from the letter to the Hebrews, which unlike the other letters attributed to Paul, is actually anonymous. There is actually a division in the tradition of the Church. Among the Greek-speaking fathers, Hebrews was always regarded as written by Paul. Among the Latin-speaking fathers, there was some skepticism about whether Paul wrote this or not. So the lectionary today treats the document as anonymous and just says, “A reading from the letter to the Hebrews.” Although in the west, it has traditionally been attributed to Paul.

In any case, so I’ll just say Hebrews. In the letter to the Hebrews 1:-6, the Church gives us the opening from this very famous letter, which begins by focusing on the mystery (again) of what in Johannine language we would call the incarnation, the mystery of Christmas. And this is the reading for today. It says this:

In many and various ways God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets; but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed the

heir of all things, through whom also he created the world. He reflects the glory of God and bears the very stamp of his nature, upholding the universe by his word of power. When he had made purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, having become as much superior to angels as the name he has obtained is more excellent than theirs.

For to what angel did God ever say, “Thou art my Son, today I have begotten thee”? Or again, “I will be to him a father, and he shall be to me a son”? And again, when he brings the first-born into the world, he says, “Let all God’s angels worship him.”

So, what’s going on here? Well, obviously again, this is a different angle—a different way of speaking about the mystery of the Incarnation in the language of Hebrews. And in this case, the imagery that the letter to the Hebrews uses is fascinating. It describes the Son as the one who was appointed heir of all things and through whom God created the world.

Now think about that for just a minute. The person that we’re celebrating on the feast of Christmas isn’t just the long awaited Davidic Messiah. He isn’t just the king of Israel or the hope of the nations. That baby in the manger at Bethlehem is also the One through whom the world was created. This is really important. When we’re looking at the mystery of the identity of Jesus, and we ask ourselves, “Is He creature or is He creator?”...He’s on the creator side of the creature/creator line. He’s the One through whom the whole universe was made. And then what Hebrews says is:

He reflects the glory of God and bears the very stamp of his nature, upholding the universe by his word of power. (Hebrews 1:3a)

Now think about that. So the mystery of Christmas is that the same baby who is a helpless child in the manger, is also the one who bears the very stamp—and the Greek word here is *charaktēr*, we get the word “character” in English from that. He bears the very stamp of the nature of God. And it’s interesting...the Greek word here is *hypostasis*, which can mean either nature or person. It’s actually going to go on to be a very important term in the later development of the doctrine of the



Trinity—that Jesus isn't just fully man. He's also fully divine. He's a divine person, a divine *hypostasis*.

So in the letter to the Hebrews, what it's revealing here is that the one who is the Son of God—Jesus of Nazareth, the Messiah—is also a divine person. He bears the very stamp of the divine nature. He's the One through whom the universe was made, and yet He comes to us as a little baby. And while He's laying in that manger, He's also sustaining the entire universe at the same time.

I like to emphasize this with my students sometimes. It is interesting that in the providence of God, Jesus comes in this world and is taken into the home of St. Joseph as His foster father, who is a carpenter—or in Greek a *tektōn*. He's a builder. And of course Jesus Himself goes on to become a *tektōn*, a builder as well. And I think it's fascinating, because just as in the human sphere, both Jesus and His father are *tektōns*. They're builders; they build things. So too in the divine realm, the Son who bears the glory and the stamp of His father's *hypostasis*, who bears the very stamp of the nature of God the Father...both the Son and the Father are also builders. But in this case, what Hebrews is saying, what is it that they built? Well, they built the universe. It's the One who made the stars who now comes in the world as a child. It's the One who sustains the whole cosmos, who we now worship and celebrate on the feast of Christmas.

And so what the letter of Hebrews here is doing—and again, in its own language, which is a little different than the language of St. John—is revealing to us the mystery of the incarnation. And it's really important...you'll notice this. Well, you might not think about this as much, but one of the first issues that had to be dealt with when proclaiming the Gospel to certain Jewish believers, was to clarify that Jesus is not one of the angels. That is very important. That when we call Him Son of God, we don't mean that He's the Son of God in the same way that the angels are.

Because when you think about it, if you look at the Old Testament...in the Old Testament, the Israelites are called the son of God in Exodus 4. But the first beings to be called sons of God (like in the book of Job) are the angels. So when the early Christians, like St. Paul, are going and preaching the Good News of the birth of

Jesus to Jewish audiences, and they say that He is the Son of God, they have to clarify that by calling Him Son of God, they don't mean that He is one of the angels, and that's what Hebrews is saying here. That He is:

...as much superior to angels as the name he has obtained is more excellent than theirs. (Hebrews 1:4)

And he goes on to give examples:

For to what angel did God ever say, "Thou art my Son, today I have begotten thee?" (Hebrews 1:5a)

So He is the only begotten Son of God (as we say in the Creed), which marks Him out as different than the angels, because the angels are all created sons of God. But Jesus is not created. The Son is not created. He is eternally begotten of the Father. He is Son from all eternity. He always has been Son, He always will be Son, and He's the Son through whom all of the world, all creatures (including the angels) were made.

Now you might be thinking, "Now why does that matter anymore?" Well, to this day, there are groups, various sects—for example, like the Jehovah's Witnesses—who will actually assert that Jesus is a creature, that the Son is a creature. He's not the creator, and that in fact, He's the highest of the angels. And that's a heresy, obviously. That's an error...it's a Christological heresy that goes back to some of the most ancient times, to the first century AD. Some people were confused. Well, is Jesus the Son of God? Is He the creator or is He a creature? Is He an angelic Son of God or is He the eternal Son of God?

And so on this feast of Christmas, what we celebrate is the fact that when we proclaim Jesus, that baby in the manger, not just to be the Messiah, but to be the Son of God, we mean that He is the One through whom the universe was made, including the angels. He is the maker of all things and the redeemer of all human beings. The One who came in the manger is also the One who made purification for sins in His cross and who sat down at the right hand of the majesty of God on high in His ascension—which reveals too, if you sit at the right hand of the king,

you have equal authority with that king. And that's what we celebrate on this feast of the birth of our King, the feast of Christmas.