

The Nativity of the Lord

(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

With the Feast of Christmas, we come at last to the end of the Advent season and the beginning of the Christmas Season. Obviously this is one of the greatest liturgical feasts of the year—it's called the Feast of the Nativity of the Lord—and one of the difficult things that I faced in making a video for this particular feast day is, as you well know, that there are multiple Masses for the Feast of Christmas. And in this case, we not only have the Vigil Mass, we have Midnight Mass, we have the Mass at dawn, and then we the Mass during the day for Christmas and they all have different readings. So for the sake of space and in order to make this helpful to anyone who is watching these videos—whether you choose to go Vigil Mass or whether you choose to go to Midnight Mass or Mass during the day—I've picked the three most popular ones—those three I just mentioned: Vigil Mass, Midnight Mass, and daytime Mass—and I'm just going to hit a couple of points about the Gospel reading and the Old Testament. So I'm not going to be focused on all the readings, we just don't have the time and space to go through every single one. But I will try to go through each one of the Masses so that if you are attending any one of them you can have something from the readings to bring with you into Mass to help you experience that beautiful and joyful experience of celebrating the Feast of Christmas in drawing from the word of God.

We are going to begin and do them in order. So let's start with the readings for the Vigil Mass. In this case, the Gospel reading is from Matthew 1:1-25—it's everyone's favorite reading, it's the genealogy of Jesus. I can hear you groaning

there through the camera because this is the one that every lector dreads, but it's a very important one. I am going to read the whole thing for you, it's a little long, but hey it's Christmas so at least you can enjoy the names. Let's begin, Matthew 1:1-25:

The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham.

Let's stop right there. Most people, before I even get into the names, are going to wonder "why would you start a book with a genealogy?" If you want someone to read your book these days, the last thing you want to do is start the book with a long list of names. But remember, as we have been learning over the course of this Advent season, for the Jews if anything was important to them it was the Old Testament, it was the Jewish Scriptures, it was the story of the family of Israel, of the people of God and how God had been working wonders in their lives and in history from the beginning. So when you read genealogy for Christmas day you need to remember, this isn't just a list of names, it wouldn't have been just a list of names to a first century Jew. This was the story of their family, this was their family story. It's like the kind of stories that we tell about our families, about our grandparents, about our parents when they were young. We remember who they were by telling the story. That is how genealogies function at the time of Christ. They were the story of your family and so Matthew here is assuming for his audience: "this is my family story, this is our family story." It's a story that begins with the call of Abraham and then leads all the way through to the birth of Jesus as Messiah. So that's what's functioning right here in the genealogy of Jesus Christ. So think of it as a family story and let's see who's in this list. Verse 2:

Abraham was the father of Isaac, and Isaac the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers, and Judah the father of Perez and Zerah by Tamar, and Perez the father of Hezron, and Hezron the father of Ram, and Ram the father of Ammin'adab, and Ammin'adab the father of Nahshon, and Nahshon the father of Salmon, and Salmon the father of Bo'az by Rahab, and Bo'az the father of Obed by Ruth, and Obed the father of Jesse, and Jesse the father of David the king.

Pause there. You might remember that a couple weeks ago in the Advent readings we talked about the Jesse tree, about the shoot from the stump of Jesse's tree. This is just another way of showing you that Christ is coming from the messianic line. In other words, this isn't just any family that Jesus is going to be born into, it's the Royal family of the people of Israel, the Royal family of David. So it continues:

And David was the father of Solomon by the wife of Uri'ah, and Solomon the father of Rehobo'am, and Rehobo'am the father of Abi'jah, and Abi'jah the father of Asa, and Asa the father of Jehosh'aphat, and Jehosh'aphat the father of Joram, and Joram the father of Uzzi'ah, and Uzzi'ah the father of Jotham, and Jotham the father of Ahaz, and Ahaz the father of Hezeki'ah, and Hezeki'ah the father of Manas'seh, and Manas'seh the father of Amos, and Amos the father of Josi'ah, and Josi'ah the father of Jechoniah and his brothers, at the time of the deportation to Babylon.

So again, these are all kings, so imagine that this is the genealogy of the Royal family. Now it keeps going:

And after the deportation to Babylon: Jechoni'ah was the father of She-al'ti-el, and She-al'ti-el the father of Zerub'babel, and Zerub'babel the father of Abi'ud, and Abi'ud the father of Eli'akim, and Eli'akim the father of Azor, and Azor the father of Zadok, and Zadok the father of Achim, and Achim the father of Eli'ud, and Eli'ud the father of Elea'zar, and Elea'zar the father of Matthan, and Matthan the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called Christ.

Notice here what is happening, Matthew is giving you powerful insight into the fact that Joseph belongs to the Royal family. Although he is a carpenter by day, who is he in reality? He's the heir to the kingdom of David, he's part of the Royal family, and that's the family into which Jesus is born. So for Matthew, writing for his first century audience, primarily Jewish Christians, this is absolutely important to establish Jesus' Royal pedigree, that he belongs—by adoption, Joseph is not his natural father, but adoptive fathership, fosterfathership is just as legally

binding in first century Judaism as biological fatherhood—to the family of David. He's heir to the throne so to speak. That's the importance of genealogy. Verse 17, Matthew continues:

So all the generations from Abraham to David were fourteen generations, and from David to the deportation to Babylon fourteen generations, and from the deportation to Babylon to the Christ fourteen generations.

Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child of the Holy Spirit; and her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly. But as he considered this, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit; she will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." All this took place to fulfil what the Lord had spoken by the prophet:

"Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and his name shall be called Emmanuel" (which means, God with us). When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took his wife, but knew her not until she had borne a son; and he called his name Jesus.¹

Wow! There's so much we can say about this very rich gospel passage. In fact, if you've been watching the videos, you know we just dealt with this passage for the Fourth Sunday of Advent. So why is the Church repeating it here? Well because she's always placing before our eyes the mystery of the incarnation and the account of the birth of Jesus, the divine son of God, Jesus the Christ. So for our purposes here I just want to highlight two things about Matthew's account of the birth of

¹ 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.

Christ. Number one: the Angels message about Jesus's name. I've said this before, I'm just going to hit it again. His name, Jesus, literally means "the Lord saves," *Yeshua*. *Yasha* is to save in Hebrew, *Yahweh* is the Hebrew name for God or for the Lord, so if we put *Ye* or *Ya* and *shua* together you get the Lord saves. Second: the other aspect about this is just the emphasis once again on the virginal conception, that Jesus is not just the adopted son of the Davidic family, of the royal family of Joseph and the royal family of David, and therefore the heir to the Davidic throne, he's also the divine son of God, he's the divine son of God conceived through the power of the Holy Spirit. Therefore, he is called Immanuel, God with us.

Now with those two points in mind, let's go back to the Old Testament for this Vigil Mass and look at what the Church chooses to highlight as Old Testament background, because here, although we get the same Gospel (in part) as last week in the Fourth Week of Advent, we have different Old Testament readings. So the Old Testament reading is meant to highlight a different theme, and this one is a little unusual. If you go to the Vigil Mass you might be surprised by the prophecy from Isaiah because it's a prophecy of the New Jerusalem and it's a depiction of God as the divine bridegroom. So let's see what that is: Isaiah 62:1 reads:

For Zion's sake I will not keep silent,
and for Jerusalem's sake I will not rest,
until her vindication goes forth as brightness,
and her salvation as a burning torch.
The nations shall see your vindication,
and all the kings your glory;
and you shall be called by a new name
which the mouth of the LORD will give.
You shall be a crown of beauty in the hand of the LORD,
and a royal diadem in the hand of your God.
You shall no more be termed Forsaken,
and your land shall no more be termed Desolate;
but you shall be called My delight is in her,
and your land Married;
for the LORD delights in you,
and your land shall be married.

For as a young man marries a virgin,

The translations are a little different for this next line. The most literal translation is “so shall your builder marry you.”

so shall your sons marry you,
and as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride,
so shall your God rejoice over you.

If you’ve been to the Vigil Mass and you’ve heard this reading you may think what does this have to do with Christmas? What is this prophecy of a city that’s depicted as a woman and as a bride have to do with the mystery of Christmas? And what does it mean to say that the new Jerusalem will have a new name called married and my delight, and that her builder will become her husband, that God will become the bridegroom? Well, I actually wrote a book on this. I think I mentioned it before, but I’ll mention it again. It is called *Jesus the Bridegroom: The Greatest Love Story Ever Told*,² and in that book what I tried to do is show you that the Jews, when they conceptualize the age of salvation and when they imagined God coming to save them, they didn’t just depict the Lord as a great judge or a king or the creator, they said that in his deepest mystery God was the bridegroom, the divine person who is so in love with his creatures that he wants to enter into a relationship of love with them that’s a marriage, a marital covenant, and that his plan is to rescue Israel, or rescue Jerusalem, who is depicted as a bride, to rescue her from sin and bring her into this marital relationship with him, this marriage covenant forever and ever, so that the Lord would become the bridegroom and all humanity, especially through Israel, would become his bride. I’ve got lots of prophecies in that book that I take you through to show you the idea of God as the Divine bridegroom who is pursuing humanity, who is pursuing his people in order to save them.

Now what does that have to do with the incarnation? Well it’s real simple. As the ancient Church Fathers told us, what happened in the incarnation was nothing less than the wedding of human and divine nature, of God and man. The two natures

² Brant Pitre, *Jesus the Bridegroom: The Greatest Love Story Ever Told* (New York: Image, 2014).

that I mentioned in our earlier video on the virginal conception become one in the virginal conception of Jesus. St. Augustine especially, and others, said that although the marriage between God and humanity, between Christ and the Church is going to be consummated on the cross, there is a real sense in which it begins in the mystery of the incarnation, it begins in the virginal conception, where heaven and earth, God and man, divine and human, are married to one another in the incarnation of Jesus Christ.

The *Catechism* actually emphasizes this when it talks about the mystery of incarnation. In CCC 218–219, it tells us that the one reason God revealed himself through the mystery of the incarnation was to show us “his sheer gratuitous love.” That’s the primary goal of the incarnation is to reveal to us that God doesn’t just want to save us from sin and death or separation from him, he wants union with us, he wants communion with us, he wants a relationship with us that is so powerful and so intimate and so permanent and so loving that it could only be described as a marriage. So the prophecy of the marriage of God and Jerusalem, of the bridegroom and the bride, in Isaiah becomes the backdrop for the wedding of humanity and divinity, of God and man, in the incarnation. So that’s the logic behind the beautiful readings for the the Feast of the Vigil Mass of Christmas. All of this gets summed up in the very name Jesus, that Jesus receives from the Angel when the Angel says “he shall be called Jesus,” because that name, as the *Catechism* also says in paragraph 430, is a twofold name. By having the name “God saves,” the very name Jesus tells us who he is and what he has come to do. It reveals his identity, he is the Lord who has come in the flesh, and it reveals his mission, he is the Lord who has come to save us. That’s the mystery of Christmas 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 (Lk 2:11).
<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

What about Midnight Mass? Well when you turn to the readings for Midnight Mass you get a different Gospel and you get a different Old Testament reading. So let's go there. In this case, the Church picks the Gospel account from Luke's Gospel. So for Midnight Mass, the reading is always from Luke 2:1–14, and again this is familiar territory. I know you know these verses, you've read them before, but let's hear them again, I'll make a few points and I will try to connect it with the Old Testament. Luke 2:1 and following:

In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be enrolled. This was the first enrollment, when Quirin'i-us was governor of Syria. And all went to be enrolled, each to his own city. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the city 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 enrolled with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child.

Pause there for just a second. Notice the geographical shift here. They were up in the northern part of the Holy Land. Nazareth is in the North, it's in the territory Galilee. But because of the census, they have to go to the South to the city of Bethlehem, which was the city of David. Why? Because Joseph belongs to the royal family of David, that is his ancestry, that is his heritage. So he goes to register where his family land and his family tribe and his family territory originates from. And that's how Mary ends up in Bethlehem for the birth of Christ. Which, by the way—just as a side note—it's pronounced 'beth-li-**HEM**. I hear lots of people say 'beth-li-**HAM**, but trust me there was no ham in Bethlehem, the Jews were not in the process of farming pigs. That will help you remember, there is no ham in Bethlehem. Now maybe they will omit that joke from the final tape and maybe they won't, but we will see, we'll leave that up to the editors. Okay, verse 6:

And while they were there, the time came for her to be delivered. And she gave birth to her first-born 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 that 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 fear. And the angel said to them, “Be not afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of a great joy which will come to all the people; for to 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 babe 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 men with whom he is pleased!” [or among “people of good will.” You can translate it either way.]

This is a beautiful, beautiful passage. There is so much there we could talk about. For our purposes here, given some time constraints, I just want to make a couple of quick points. Number one, this whole text is structured and focused in order to reveal that Jesus is the Davidic king. That he is the heir to the kingdom of David. In other words, that he is the long-awaited Messiah. That’s why Luke, two times, references the city of Bethlehem. For example, if you go back to 1 Samuel 16, Bethlehem was the town of Jesse and the town of David’s family. So Luke’s emphasizing Bethlehem to show you that Jesus isn’t just any kind of King, he is a Davidic king, he is an heir to the Davidic throne, a member of the Davidic family, because it was the kingdom of David that God had promised, back in the Old Testament in 2 Samuel 7, that it would last forever. Yet, in the Old Testament, within a couple hundred years, the Kingdom of David is in shambles. Within 500 years, a little over 500 years, it’s been disbursed to the four winds with the Babylonian overthrow of the Jews in the exile at the time of Jeremiah and Ezekiel in 587 B.C. So if you’re living in the first century A.D. and you’re a Jew and you see God promise David that his kingdom will last forever, it pretty much looks like He’s failed, that God’s promises have not come to pass, that He hasn’t kept His word.

So when the angel appears and says “there’s good news, unto you is born this day, in the city of David, a Savior who is Christ the Lord,” he is not just saying “oh, here is a king,” he is saying “the promises of God are coming to fulfillment from the Old Testament.” So Jesus is the Davidic king, he’s the Messiah, he is the

anointed one. But he is not just the Davidic king, he's also the divine king. The angel says something interesting here. He says "unto you is born this day a savior, who is Christ"—that's the word for the anointed one, *Christos*, the Messiah. But he is not just Christ, he is Christ **the Lord**, and the Greek word here for "the Lord" is *Kyrios*. We get the expression *Kyrie, Eleison* from this (Lord, have mercy). *Kyrios* is an interesting word because although in some contexts it can be used to refer to a figure of royalty, like a British Lord, a human being who has some power or authority over others, it also is the primary name for God in the Old Testament. So if you read the Old Testament in Hebrew, you are going to see the name of God over and over again, thousands of times, as *Yahweh*—that is a modern pronunciation, we are not exactly sure how it was pronounced—YHWH, the sacred name of God, the Lord. But in the Greek Bible, the Old Testament, that gets translated as *Kyrios* thousands of times. So in order to understand the meaning, you have to look at the context. And in this context, Luke appears to be revealing to us, especially after the virginal conception, that Jesus isn't just the Christ, he is Christ, the Lord. He's the divine Davidic king, he's the divine son of God, not just the son of David so to speak, not just the heir to the Davidic throne. So he's *Christos*, the anointed one—the translation of the word Messiah; and he is *Kyrios*—the translation of the Hebrew word for the Lord.

Now if you have any doubts about that emphasis whatsoever, you just go back to the Old Testament reading for today. The Old Testament reading is from Isaiah 9 and, as you might have suspected by now if you've been following the Advent readings, it's another prophecy. In this case it's very much a prophecy of the king of Israel. But it's interesting because this King both looks like an earthly king but he also seems to be divine. So let's look at Isaiah 9:2, the first reading:

The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shined. Thou hast multiplied the nation, thou hast increased its joy; they rejoice before thee as with joy at the harvest, as men rejoice when they divide the spoil. For the yoke of his burden, and the staff for his shoulder, the rod of his oppressor, thou hast broken as on the day of Mid'ian. For every boot of the tramping warrior in battle tumult and every garment rolled in blood will be burned as fuel for the fire.

In other words, there is not going to be any war anymore. Why, how could there possibly be an end to war? Verse 6:

For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government will be upon his shoulder, and his name will be called “Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.”

If you’re hearing Handel’s *Messiah* in your mind right now, that is because this is where he gets from, Isaiah chapter 9.

Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end, upon 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 for evermore. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this.

What an amazing prophecy. What do we make of that? Well, if you look at that passage from Isaiah, again you can see the same two themes that you see in Luke. On the one hand, it’s a prophecy of a future Davidic king, a future King descended from David who will not just sit upon the throne of David, but who will revive and restore the kingdom of David which God had promised will last forever. So on the one level it’s a human king, the Messiah. On the other hand, there is that verse that sticks out there, where he says “Wonderful God...Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace,” and he describes the king as “mighty God.” Now in the New American Bible, which we use in the lectionary, the translation there is a little off because it says he shall be called God-Hero. It is not a completely inaccurate translation of the Hebrew. The Hebrew word is, “*El gibor.*” *El* means God and *gibor* does mean mighty or strong, but it puts the emphasis in a way that is not as clear in the English. This is a king who is mighty, and somehow appears to be God. He has the qualities of divinity, and from ancient times the Church saw in this prophecy a literal fulfillment in the incarnation of Jesus. He isn’t just mighty like God, he actually is God, he is the divine son of God.

So those are the readings from Midnight Mass and there is one last point that I would like to make. What about the readings for Midnight Mass in the living tradition? Well there is so much commentary on the account of the birth of Jesus in Luke—if you look at the writings of the Church Fathers—one of my favorite

spiritual applications that they draw out from the account of the birth of Jesus in Luke is the imagery of Jesus wrapped in his swaddling cloths and laid in a manger at Bethlehem. If you recall for a second, the manger was a food trough for the animals to eat from. Sometimes you will hear songs or people today say that Jesus was born in a manger. He was not born in a manger, a manger is a food trough. He was born in a cave or in some kind of stable, but he is laid in the food trough, in the manger, by Mary to give him a little bed. So many of the Church Fathers saw in the imagery of Jesus, the infant, wrapped in swaddling clothes and laid in a manger, a kind of prophecy of two events.

First, swaddling clothes point forward to his shroud that his body would be wrapped in after the crucifixion. If you know ancient practices or if you are familiar with this, when they would wrap a baby in swaddling clothes, they would wrap it in bands of cloth very tightly to keep the body together, so it almost looks like a little shroud for the baby. So the Fathers saw that swaddling cloths as pointing forward to the passion, death and burial of Jesus. But they also saw the manger as a prefiguration of the fact that in dying, Christ would become food for the whole world. So it's a prefiguration of the Eucharist, that Christ, the babe in Bethlehem, is food for the whole world. If you have any doubts about that, they pointed out that the name of the very city in Hebrew, *Bethlehem*, means house of bread. *Beth* means house and *lehem* means bread. So Jesus, the bread of life, is born in the house of bread and laid in a manger to be bread for the life of the world. This is a powerful and beautiful image to take with you into the Midnight Mass on the Feast of Christmas to celebrate the one who not only became a little child, but who comes to us in a little host as bread for the whole world.

Mass 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>	Heb 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.

Alright, one last point. If you're like me, and you have little children and Midnight Mass doesn't work, maybe you go to Mass during Christmas day. There's one last set of readings, this is the Christmas Day Mass, and here the Church chooses one other Gospel focused on the incarnation. This time it's from the Gospel of John, which is many people's favorite Gospel. The gospel for this week is from John 1:1-18. Again, it's a long text but I'll try to make a few insights as we go through and then primarily we will connect it with the Old Testament text for the day.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God; all things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made. In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came for testimony, to bear witness to the light, that all might believe through him. He was not the light, but came to bear witness to the light. The true light that enlightens every man was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world knew him not. He came to his own home, and his own people received him not.

But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God; who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.

And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father. (John bore witness to him, and cried, "This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me ranks before me, for he was before me.'") And from his fullness have we all received, grace upon grace. For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God; the only Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known.

This is a beautiful, beautiful text, the opening to the Gospel of John. Notice the difference here. Whereas Matthew and Mark tell us about the birth of Jesus Christ in time—they focus on his birth as a little child—John goes back to before the beginning of time. John goes back to the very dawn of creation and tells us that not only was Jesus conceived of a virgin, but that he is the eternal word, the eternal son of God who had no beginning and who through whom all of the world was made, through whom the whole universe was made.

So just a few points here. Number one, when John says the word was with God and the Word was God, he's using the image of the word, the *logos* in Greek, to refer to the eternal word of the Father. And when he says the word was with God and the Word was God, he's revealing to us a little glimpse of the mystery of the Trinity. That although you have one God, that one God has an eternal word who is a distinct person. So we have God the Father and we also have God the son, who is the eternal Word of the Father, who has no beginning and no end. So the word was not only with God as a distinct person, he also was God. He has a divine nature. Now, this is important because what it shows us is in absolutely explicit terms, that Jesus is not just fully human; he is fully divine. He is the one through whom the whole universe was made. Sometimes we think of God the Father as creator, and that's correct, but remember, all three persons of the Trinity act together. So the world is created through the agency, not just of the Father, but of the Son and the Holy Spirit as well. So, when Jesus comes into the world as the word made flesh, he comes into the world as a man who was the one who made the whole universe.

One of the images I like to use with my students in class sometimes to drive this home, is the fact that of all occupations, Jesus took up the occupation of carpenter (the Gospels tell us that). Why? Well maybe because he liked to build things. And what did he like to build? Well he liked build things like the universe, because he's the one who makes the whole world. He makes all the angels, all the creatures of the world, all the planets, all the stars, he is the word through whom the whole world was made. And the interesting thing is, not only is Jesus a carpenter, but Joseph is a carpenter, his father is also a builder. It's interesting because the same is true, in a sense, within the Trinity. Jesus, the word, is the one through whom the world is made, but the Father also makes the world. He is a builder of universes, a builder of the cosmos. So that is just some of my own spiritual reflections on this, but I hope it is helpful for you to see the dramatic impact of John saying here that

the word that became flesh was God and that the word was with God from the very beginning.

The second element here that I want to highlight is the image of the word becoming flesh. If you skip down to verse 14, the mystery of Christmas has always been summed up in this particular verse, “the Word became flesh.” This is in fact where we get the language of the incarnation from. The language of incarnation comes from the Latin word for flesh, that the word takes on flesh. Just like a carnivore is a person who eats flesh, so too the incarnation describes the mystery of God taking on our human flesh and becoming man. And most of us understand that, but sometimes we miss that in the Greek here when it says the Word became flesh and dwelt among us. The Greek word there is actually *skênoô*, it literally means the Word became flesh and *tabernacled* among us. That is the Greek word for tabernacle. He pitched his tent among us so that he came to dwell with us as man. He knows what it’s like to be fully human. He knows what it’s like to experience everything we experience as human beings with the exception of sin. He is like us in all things but sin. God loves us so much that he wants to be with us, he wants to tabernacle with us, not only in the incarnation, but also in the Eucharist as well. What does Christ do? When he becomes man, he suffers, dies, and rises again, but then he doesn’t depart, he doesn’t leave us behind, he remains with us in the tabernacle. He remains with us in the Eucharist, because that’s who he is. As Matthew said, he is “God with us.” And that is the great mystery and the truth of the incarnation. So that’s just two points from a very rich text there in John’s prologue. There are so many things that I’d like to say about it but I have to restrain myself. One day I will do a Bible study on the Gospel of John and we will walk through this point by point, and even I won’t have the time to tell you everything. There is just so much to say here.

With that in mind, let’s go back to the Old Testament reading and make sure we are clear on what the Old Testament reading is and why it’s chosen for this day. In this Mass, the Christmas Day Mass, you won’t be surprised to hear that the reading is from...Isaiah. Over and over again, throughout Advent, Isaiah gets front and center. He gets center stage. In fact, he was such an important prophet, that some people actually call Isaiah the fifth gospel. Although it’s in the Old Testament, it’s the fifth gospel. There are so many prophecies of the incarnation and of the coming

of Christ, and this last one is from Isaiah 52. So the first reading for the daytime Christmas Mass is Isaiah 52:7-10, and this is what it says:

How beautiful upon the mountains
are the feet of him who brings good tidings,
who publishes peace, who brings good tidings of good,
who publishes salvation,
who says to Zion, “Your God reigns.”
Hark, your watchmen lift up their voice,
together they sing for joy;
for eye to eye they see
the return of the LORD to Zion.
Break forth together into singing,
you waste places 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.

So why does the Church pick this passage? Well it is one of the quintessential passages, in the book of Isaiah, proclaiming the good news. And what is the good news? For Isaiah, it’s the good news of the coming of the Lord. It’s the good news of the return of the Lord to Zion, of the coming of the Lord to Jerusalem. And in the incarnation, that prophecy is fulfilled, not just metaphorically or spiritually with God coming to assist his people, it is fulfilled literally in God coming in person, in the person of his son to Jerusalem as man in the person of Jesus Christ. And that truly is good news.

So in closing then, as we continue to celebrate the feast of Christmas, I would really encourage you to ponder and reflect and to take out the *Catechism* of the Catholic Church—if you if have a copy—there’s a great section that I try to read every Christmas. It is in paragraph 456–460. In this section the Church takes the language from John’s Gospel for the Christmas Day Mass and asks this very important question: Why did the word become flesh? In other words, what’s the

reason for the incarnation? Why would God do this? And the Church gives four main reasons for the incarnation. I'll just leave those with you to reflect on.

Number one, the first reason for the incarnation, according to the *Catechism*, is to save us by reconciling us with God. So the problem of sin is that sin separates us. Just like sin in a human relationship separates a person from another, a spouse from her husband or a brother from his sister, it does the same thing with God, because God is a person, and our sin damages our relationship with God. So the first reason for the incarnation is that whenever we sin against God, we create, in a sense, a kind of infinite gap between ourselves and God. And God himself bridges that gap by becoming man, in order to save us by reconciling us to himself, by forgiving that sin and drawing us back to himself. So that is the first and most important reason for the incarnation. It is to save us by reconciling us to himself. But that is not the only reason. For a lot of people, they just think God became man, or God sent his son, in order to save us. But he doesn't just become man to save us from hell or save us from sin and death.

According to the *Catechism*, the second reason is that God becomes man in order to reveal his love for us. This is very important. If you look at the writings of the Church Fathers and theologians like St. Thomas Aquinas, St. Thomas says that God could have saved humanity simply by declaring us to be forgiven. But he didn't do that, he chose to become man and then goes to the cross to show us that he doesn't just want to save us, but that he loves us. And he knew that in the incarnation and the crucifixion, there would be no greater way to show us that he loves us, than to become man and then go to the cross and die for us. "For greater love hath no one than this, that he lay down his life for someone else / for his friends" (see John 15:13). So God wanted to show us that he loves us, and he does that through the incarnation and the cross.

Third. He doesn't stop there. The *Catechism* says there is a third reason he becomes incarnate. Because God doesn't just want to save us, he doesn't just want to show us he loves us, he also wants us to love him in response, because that's what love is all about. It's a relationship, it's a two-way street. So the third reason God becomes man is in order to be our model for holiness. Christ comes into the world in order to show us how to love the Father. He comes into the world to show us how to love God, because that is what holiness is all about. In Hebrew, the word

holy means to be set apart (*kadosh*), not just set apart from sin, but set apart for God, just like a husband is set apart for his wife and a wife is set apart for her husband. That's what you do when you love someone, you give yourself to them. We needed God to show us how to do that and so the third reason he becomes man, he comes flesh, is to teach us what it means to be holy, to show us how to love God, not just in part, but in whole, to give everything, all that we are. To love him our whole heart, our whole mind, all our soul and all our strength. That is what Christ does.

Finally: last but not least, the *Catechism* says the fourth reason God becomes man, that the word becomes flesh, is to make us partakers of the divine nature. In other words, to make us sharers in his divine life. There is a very powerful passage in the *Catechism*, quoting some of the Saints, which says this: “this is why the Word became man, and the Son of God became the Son of man: so that man, by entering into communion with the Word and thus receiving divine sonship, might become a son of God” (CCC 460). And then again, this is from St. Athanasius, “the Son of God became man so that we might become God” (CCC 460). And then finally, St. Thomas Aquinas, this is most staggering of all, this is the *Catechism*: “The only-begotten Son of God, wanting to make us sharers in his divinity, assumed our nature, so that he, made man, might make men gods.” (CCC 460). Now at first glance that might sound blasphemous, it might sound like the *Catechism* is saying that Christ became man so that we can become divine persons, that we can become gods, almost sounding like Mormonism. That is not what it means. It doesn't mean that we become divine persons, it means that we become partakers of the divine nature. We become partakers of the immortality of God, the goodness of God, the life of God, the love of God. We become sharers in all of that so that we really do become sons of God in the son. And that's really the ultimate mystery of Christmas, it is our entry into the life of the Trinity. That we become sons in the son so that we can worship the Father in the power the Holy Spirit and enter into that “eternal exchange of love” which is the blessed Trinity: Father, Son and Holy Spirit (see CCC 221). And if that strikes you as a little too dramatic way to describe the incarnation, just remember what we say in the Mass. Remember the words of the Mass—it is all in the Mass, in the liturgy—when the priest mingles the water and the wine, what does he say? “By the mingling of this water and wine, may we come to share in the divinity of Christ, who humbled himself to share in

our humanity.” That’s the mystery of Christmas right there, hidden in the Mass.
Thanks everybody. I hope you have a Merry Christmas. God bless.