

## Readings for the First Sunday after Christmas

31<sup>st</sup> December 2023

First Reading: Isaiah 61:10-62:3

I will greatly rejoice in the LORD,  
my whole being shall exult in my God;  
for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation,  
he has covered me with the robe of righteousness,  
as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland,  
and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.  
For as the earth brings forth its shoots,  
and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up,  
so the Lord GOD will cause righteousness and praise  
to spring up before all the nations.  
For Zion's sake I will not keep silent,  
and for Jerusalem's sake I will not rest,  
until her vindication shines out like the dawn,  
and her salvation like a burning torch.  
The nations shall see your vindication,  
and all the kings your glory;  
and you shall be called by a new name  
that 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.

Second Reading: Galatians 4:4-7

When the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children. And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, 'Abba! Father!' So you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir, through God.

Gospel: St Luke 2:22-40

When the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord (as it is written in the law of the Lord, "Every firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord"), and they offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, "a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons."

Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon; this man was righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he

would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Messiah. Guided by the Spirit, Simeon came into the temple, and when the parents brought in the child Jesus to do for him what was customary under the law, Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying,

“Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace,  
according to your word,  
my eyes have seen your salvation,  
which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples,  
a light for revelation to the gentiles  
and for glory to your people Israel.”

And the child's father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him. Then Simeon blessed them and said to his mother Mary, “This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul, too.”

There was also a prophet, Anna the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age, having lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshiped there with fasting and prayer night and day. At that moment she came and began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.

When they had finished everything required by the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom, and the favour of God was upon him.

### **A Reflection for the First Sunday after Christmas**

In some parts of the church, the Sunday after Christmas is known as Holy Family Sunday. During much of Advent and at Christmas we have thought much about the immediate family that Jesus was born into, and the events that took place in the lead up to and around his birth. And we will continue to do so as we move next week to Epiphany and on to Candlemas at the beginning of February, when we will hear again today's Gospel account of the presentation of Jesus in the Temple, forty days after his birth. But today, we widen our focus, to think about relationships and what it means to be part of God's family.

All Christians are part of the family of the church, the body of Christ, and being part of that family is an important part of being a Christian. We are not called to be Christians in isolation but in relationship with one another. However, we need to be careful with how we use the word 'family'. For all of us, 'family' is a word full of different meanings, and some of our understandings will be different to those of other people, for families are formed in many different ways. Many of us will be part of more than one group we might describe as 'family', and familial relationships are not only formed with those with whom we have a blood relationship. At their heart, all families are about belonging, and that belonging is basic to what it means to be human.

The word 'family' will also evoke memories and emotions, some of which are good and some of which are likely to be painful. The same is as true of church families as any other family, and I apologise now if I inadvertently tread on some associations that are painful for you.

We also need to be careful about how we think about the Holy Family of Jesus, Mary and Joseph. In art, we can find many images which show them as white Europeans: the Holy Family cast in the image of those who held power in the church for many centuries. But the Holy Family was from the Middle East, not Europe. Today, we are more likely to have come across images that portray them differently – an image of a black Madonna and child perhaps. At the recent Christmas Tree festival in the Church of Scotland in Ullapool, there was also an exhibition of nativity sets from around the world which showed the Holy Family and other characters with the features of many different races – a reminder that we are all made in God's image.

When we think of the word 'family', it is understandable if our thoughts go immediately to our own families or close-knit groups, but we need to try to enlarge our understanding, to include all of God's children in how we think of 'family', however, enormous that task might seem. And, as children of God, we also need to recognise that the family of God includes families torn apart by war, families who have been decimated by famine or disease, families who have been separated as they flee their homes to seek safety. These families are our family too; we have a shared identity with them as children of God.

All of our readings today have something to say about the family of God. In the short passage from Galatians, Paul sets the birth of Jesus as a human baby in the broader context of God's plan for salvation, providing an opening for all to be redeemed and all to be adopted as God's children. These few verses are full of words that indicate familial inclusiveness: heirs, children, adoption, Son, Father. We have been redeemed by Jesus to become part of God's family. At the time that Paul was writing, the idea of redemption would have often been associated with the buying out of slaves, perhaps, though not necessarily, going as far as freeing them from slavery. Here, he speaks of redeeming those under the law, as if the law was like a master keeping us in bondage. The Jewish Law was not intended in that way; it was intended as God's guide to how he would wish people to live. Not only did humanity fail to keep to its ideals, but those who controlled the Law added to and expanded it. Later in Jesus' life, we see many of his parables and teachings where he condemns those in positions of leadership who keep the letter of the law, and also impose it strictly on others, but neglect the spirit of the Law.

Paul links redemption to adoption as children. Although uncommon in Judaism, in Roman practice adoption was legally binding and established a right to inheritance, so there is a further connection with the word 'heirs'. And, as children, he reminds us that we are filled with the Spirit of Christ who teaches us to recognise God as a loving parent, who teaches us to call him 'Abba', a family term of endearment, equivalent to 'Daddy'.

Isaiah, in a passage that comes near the end of the prophecy, is writing to exiles returning from Babylon, and is full of the exuberant joy of salvation. Here, the return of the exiles foreshadows the salvation brought by Christ. His first image is of a bridegroom and a bride, and a wedding is a special occasion for celebration in any family. He moves on to agricultural images of new growth and abundance. Those who celebrate Christmas in the southern hemisphere will see this all around them. For ourselves in the northern hemisphere, we have at least moved to lengthening days and the first bulbs starting to poke through the cold ground in places. Spring time and new growth is what we look forward to at this time of year – I can't be the only person who feels a lifting of the spirits as we pass the solstice in December.

But Isaiah also looks forward to that time when God will do a new thing, when all people will be drawn into the heart of God, a time of new and restored relationship with God and one another. It is a vision partially fulfilled in the birth of Jesus, that will come to completion when he returns again in glory.

In our Gospel passage, Simeon, and also Anna though the Gospel writer gives her less 'airtime', both saw that hope of salvation envisaged by Isaiah when they recognised the infant Jesus in the Temple as the one who would save the world. Simeon's words were honest: the path for this child would not run smooth. He recognised the peace and salvation that the child will bring, but also the resistance and opposition that will be encountered. Whilst Christ came for all, not everyone will welcome him.

Simeon and Anna encountered the Christ-child in the Temple because of their faithful adherence to worship and prayer. They were there, that was what they did, day in and day out, whether or not they felt like it, whether or not it was convenient. And their patient faithfulness was rewarded – they were there when Jesus showed up.

In the Christmas season, the church is reminded of why it exists. It is reminded that Jesus' birth enables us all to become part of God's family. For all the failings of the institutional church in its many and varied manifestations, we are the body of Christ when we are together as God's family. And the Christmas season is an opportunity to ponder anew God's work in the world and, as the world around us turns its thoughts to new year's resolutions, it is an opportunity to not only recall but also to recommit ourselves to being part of God's family and to our Christian lives.