

Christmas
Year A, 2025

Is 62:1-5 Is 9:1-6
Is 62:11-12 Is 52:7-10

Isaiah and the promise of the Christ

There are officially four masses that can be said for Christmas. There is a vigil mass, a mass at night, a mass at dawn, and a mass during the day. In each of these masses, the first reading is taken from the prophet Isaiah. Also worth noting is that in the readings for masses during Advent – both Sunday masses and weekday masses – Isaiah is by far the most represented prophet, the most represented book of the Old Testament. We can say without exaggerating that Isaiah is the Christmas prophet.

Advent, which we have just finished, is a prophetic season, a time for prophets and prophecies. This is what accounts, I think, for the special joy of Christmas, which fulfills and completes Advent. What is long anticipated and foretold finally comes to pass. Expectation gives way to experience; promise to possession. And we are made glad. The waiting is over; worry is no more; all is well.

We see something of this special Christmas joy, where anticipation becomes actualization, in each passage from Isaiah chosen for the four masses of Christmas. In the vigil mass, Isaiah foretells that Zion – a name that stands sometimes for a mountain, other times for a territory, a city, or for the people of God gathered together in his name – will no longer be called forsaken or desolate. No, Zion will become the delight of the Lord, chosen by God above all the

nations on earth to be espoused to God like a bride in whom he rejoices. This great love between God (the groom) and Zion (the bride) will bring forth a greater love, a greater joy.

And what is the joyful expectation of every married couple, but children? And this we hear foretold in the reading from Isaiah during the mass at night: *"For a child is born to us, a son is given us."* This child, this son – prophesied by Isaiah – is meant to bring *"abundant joy and great rejoicing"* to a people who have been waiting in darkness. Just as a woman is pregnant with a child, so the night is pregnant with the day. When the time for waiting is over – and waiting is a hardship, a period of suffering, endurance – the woman gives birth, as does the night, and light is born. Jesus himself would later use the image of pregnancy to describe his disciples' anguish and grief when he will be taken from them, a sorrow that will turn to joy when they will see him again: *"When a woman is in labor, she is in anguish because her hour has arrived; but when she has given birth to a child, she no longer remembers the pain because of her joy that a child has been born into the world"* (Jn 16:21). This son, prophesied by Isaiah, is the Son, God from God, Light from light: *"What came to be through him was life, and this life was the light of the human race; the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it"* (Jn 1:4-5). Christmas joy is the joy of a child, and it is children (or the childlike) who especially take delight in the joy of Christmas.

And this child of light foretold by Isaiah, what will he be, what will he do? This is answered in the passage from Isaiah chosen for the third mass of Christmas, the mass at dawn. At dawn, the beginning of a new day, as the darkness of night is scattered, Isaiah announces to holy Zion: *"your savior comes!"* This child, this light, is salvation, and salvation is his reward and recompense and redemption. No longer a city forsaken, Zion is a land that is *"frequented,"* meaning visited. God visits Zions with salvation, with a savior, and because of this divine visitation, the visited people are now called *"the holy people, the redeemed of the Lord."* This, too, is the joy of Christmas, the culmination of that long anticipated day *"when the kindness and generous love of God our savior appeared, not because of any righteous deeds we had done but because of his mercy, [and] he saved us"* (Tit 3:4-5).

More wondrous still is that joy is not exhausted because there is an expectation, an anticipation, that is still building, yet to be fully realized. What God first did by choosing one people, Israel, to be his own, he wills to do for all the world. This is the sense of the passage from the prophet Isaiah as found in the fourth Christmas mass, the mass during the day. *"Announcing peace, bearing good news, announcing salvation, and saying to Zion, 'Your God is King!,'"* Isaiah proclaims that God's salvation is meant to comfort not only his people, to redeem not only Jerusalem, but that what God has done he has done *"in the sight of all the nations,"* so that *"all the ends of the earth will behold the salvation of our God."* All lands, all peoples, all nations, are invited to share in this joy, to sing joyfully to the

Lord, to break into song, to sing praise (Ps 98:4). It is not just God's people Israel, symbolically called Zion, who anticipate salvation and receive it with joy. It is the whole world. St Paul explains this in his letter to the Romans: *"For [all] creation awaits with eager expectation the revelation of the children of God; ... in hope that creation itself would be set free from slavery to corruption and share in the glorious freedom of the children of God"* (Rom 8:19, 21). All creation awaits the revelation of the savior and his redemption. The joy of Christmas is joy to the whole world.

This little Christmas scriptural tour through the prophet Isaiah is meant to remind us that all that the prophets taught us to hope for finds fulfillment in today's feast, when we celebrate the birth of the Savior, whose light brings joy to all the world. The salvation of God that all the ends of the earth will behold has a name, a holy name, and he is called Jesus, *"for he will save his people from their sins"* (Mt 1:21). We call him by inspired prophetic titles: Emmanuel God-with-us, Son of David, *"Wonder-Counselor, God-Hero, Father-Forever, Prince of Peace."* By whatever title, he is Jesus the Christ, the true light, who sheds his light on all, and to those who believe in him, who in faith accept him and his light, he gives the power to become children of God (Jn 1:9, 11, 12), to be sons and daughters of light, heirs to life everlasting in the kingdom that will have no end.

This is the joy of Christmas, and it points us to the promise of the world to come. May the peace, joy, and light of Jesus be with you on this Christmas Day. Merry Christmas!