

# Season of Christmas

## General Texts

Next to the yearly celebrations of the paschal mystery, the Church considers nothing more important than the memorial of Christ's birth and early manifestations. This is the purpose of the season of Christmas.

The season of Christmas runs from Evening Prayer I of Christmas until the Sunday after Epiphany or after 6 January, inclusive. *General Norms for the Liturgical Year and Calendar* 32, 33

For the vigil and the three Masses of Christmas both the prophetic readings and the others have been chosen from the Roman tradition. The gospel on the Sunday within the octave of Christmas, feast of the Holy Family, is about Jesus' childhood and the other readings are about the virtues of family life. On the octave of Christmas, solemnity of the Mary, Mother of God, the readings are about the Virgin Mother of God and the giving of the holy Name of Jesus. On the second Sunday after Christmas, the readings are about the mystery of the Incarnation. On the Epiphany, the Old Testament reading and the gospel continue the Roman tradition; the text for the reading from the apostolic letters is about the calling of all peoples to salvation. On the feast of the Baptism of the Lord, the texts chosen are about this mystery.

*Lectionary for Mass Introduction* 95

Much of the richness and complexity of the mystery of the Lord's manifestation is reflected in displays of popular piety, which is especially sensitive to the childhood of Christ which reveals his love for us. Popular piety intuitively grasps:

- the importance of the 'spirituality of gift', which is proper to Christmas: 'a child is born for us, a son is given to us' (cf. Is 9, 5), a gift expressing the infinite love of God, who 'so loved the world that he gave his only Son' (John 3, 16);
- the message of solidarity conveyed by the event of Christmas: solidarity with sinful man, for whom, in Christ, God became man 'for us men and for our salvation'; solidarity with the poor, because the Son of God 'who' was rich but became poor for your sake, to make you rich out of your poverty' (2 Cor 8, 9);
- the sacredness of human life and the wonderful event that is every birth, since the Word of life came amongst men and was made visible through his birth of the Virgin Mary (cf. 1 John 1, 2);

- the messianic joy and peace to which man has aspired in every age: the Angels announce the birth of the Saviour of the world to the shepherds, the 'Prince of Peace' (Is 9,5) and proclaim 'peace on earth to men of good will' (Lk 2, 14);
- the spirit of simplicity and poverty, humility and trust in God, suggested by the events surrounding the birth of Christ.

At Midnight Mass, an event of major liturgical significance and of strong resonance in popular piety, the following could be given prominence:

- at the beginning of Mass, the proclamation of the Saviour's birth according the formula contained in the *Roman Martyrology* could be made in song;
- the prayer of the faithful should really be universal, and where appropriate, use several languages; and the poor should always be remembered in the presentation of the gifts;
- at the end of Mass, the faithful could be invited to kiss the image of the Child Jesus, which is then placed in a crib erected in the church or somewhere nearby.

Many traditions and genuine manifestations of popular piety have been developed in relation to the Solemnity of the Lord's Epiphany, which is of ancient origin and rich in spiritual content. Among such forms of popular piety, mention may be made of:

- the solemn proclamation of Easter and the principal dominical feasts; its revival in many places would be opportune since it served to make the connection between the Epiphany and Easter, and orientate all feasts towards the greatest Christian solemnity;
- the blessing of homes, on whose lintels are inscribed the Cross of salvation, together with the indication of the year and the initials of the three wise men (C+M+B), which can also be interpreted to mean *Christus mansionem benedicat*, written in blessed chalk; this custom, often accompanied by processions of children accompanied by their parents, expresses the blessing of Christ through the intercession of the three wise men and is an occasion for gathering offerings for charitable and missionary purposes;
- initiatives in solidarity with those who come from afar; whether Christian or not, popular piety has encouraged a sense of solidarity and openness. *Directory of Popular Piety*, 108, 111, 118

## Excerpts from Prayers

*In the wonder of the incarnation*

*your eternal Word has brought the eyes of faith  
a new and radiant vision of your glory.*

*In him we see our God made visible  
and so are caught up in the love of the God we cannot see.*

Preface of Christmas I

*May we celebrate this eucharist with greater joy than ever  
since it marks the beginning of our redemption.*

Prayer over the Gifts, Birth of the Lord, Vigil Mass

*Today you revealed in Christ your eternal plan of salvation  
and showed him as the light of all peoples.*

*Now that his glory has shone among us  
you have renewed humanity in his immortal image.*

Preface of the Epiphany

# Christmas Season

25 December

Sunday between 26 & 31 December

1 January

Sunday between 2 & 8 January

**The Birth of the Lord**

**The Holy Family**

**Mary Mother**

**2nd Sunday after Christmas**

— not celebrated in England and Wales

**The Epiphany of the Lord**

	The Birth of the Lord	Midnight	Dawn	Day
<b>Vigil</b>				
<b>Entrance Antiphon</b>	<i>Today you will know that the Lord is coming to save us, and in the morning You will see his glory.</i> (one of the following psalms may be used for verses) Ps 131 or 97 or 23	<i>The Lord said to me: You are my Son; this day I have begotten you.</i> Ps 2:1, 2, 6, 8–11 or <i>Let all rejoice in the Lord, for our Saviour is born to the world. True peace has descended from heaven.</i> Ps 2:1, 2, 6, 8–11 or Ps 147:12–20	<i>A light will shine on us, the Lord is born for us; he shall be called Wonderful God, Prince of peace, Father of the world to come; and his kingship will never end.</i> Ps 92 or Is 9:1–2, 5–6	<i>A child is born for us, a song is given to us; dominion is laid on his shoulder, and he shall be called Wonderful-Counsellor.</i> Is 9:1–2, 5–6 or Ps 95
<b>First Reading</b>	<i>Isa 62:1–5</i> <i>The Lord takes delight in you.</i>	<i>Isa 9:1–6</i> <i>A son is given to us</i>	<i>Isa 62:11–12</i> <i>Look, your saviour comes.</i>	<i>All the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God.</i> Isa 52:7–10
<b>Responsorial Psalm</b>	<i>Ps 88:4–5, 16–17, 27, 29</i> <i>I will sing for ever of your love, Lord.</i>	<i>Ps 95:1–2a, 2b–3, 11–12, 13</i> <i>Today a saviour has been born to us; he is Christ the Lord.</i>	<i>Ps 96:1, 6, 11–12</i> <i>This day new light will shine upon the earth.</i>	<i>All the ends of the earth have seen the salvation of our God.</i> Ps 97:1–2–3a, 3b–4, 5–6
<b>Second Reading</b>	<i>Acts 13:16–17, 22–25</i> <i>Paul's witness to Christ, the son of David</i>	<i>Titus 2:11–14</i> <i>God's grace has been revealed to the whole human race.</i>	<i>Titus 3:4–7</i> <i>It was for no reason except his own compassion that he saved us.</i>	<i>Heb 1:1–6</i> <i>God has spoken to us through his Son.</i>
<b>Gospel Acclamation</b>	<i>—</i> <i>Tomorrow there will be an end to sin in the world and the saviour of the world will be king.</i>	<i>Luke 2:10–11</i> <i>I bring you news of great joy: today a saviour has been born to us, Christ the Lord.</i>	<i>Luke 2: 14</i> <i>Glory to God in the highest heaven, and peace to men who enjoy his favour.</i>	<i>—</i> <i>A hallowed day has dawned upon us. Come, you nations, worship the Lord, for today a great light has shone down upon the earth.</i>
<b>Gospel</b>	<i>Luke 1:1–25</i> <i>The ancestry of Jesus Christ, the son of David.</i> or Matt 1:18–25 (shorter)	<i>Luke 2:1–14</i> <i>Today a saviour has been born to us.</i>	<i>Luke 2:15–20</i> <i>The shepherds found Mary and Joseph and the baby.</i>	<i>John 1:1–18 or</i> <i>John 1:1–5, 9–14 (shorter)</i> <i>The Word was made flesh, and lived among us.</i>
<b>Communion Antiphon</b>	<i>cf. Is 40:5</i> <i>The glory of the Lord will be revealed, all mankind will see the saving power of God.</i> (the following psalm may be used for verses) Ps 23	<i>John 1:4</i> <i>The Word of God became man; we have seen his glory,</i> Ps 147: 12–20 or Is 9:1–2, 5–6	<i>Daughter of Zion, exult; shout aloud, daughter of Jerusalem! Your King is coming, the Holy One, the Saviour of the world.</i> Ps 97 or 98 or 33	<i>cf. Zech 9:9</i> <i>All the ends of the earth have seen the saving power of God.</i> Ps 97:1–9

The Holy Family		Mary, Mother of God	2nd Sunday after Christmas	Epiphany of the Lord
Year A	Year B	Year C		
First Reading	Eccl 3:2-6, 12-14 <i>He who fears the Lord respects his parents</i>	Gen 15:1-6; 21:1-3 <i>Your heir shall be your own flesh and blood.</i>	1 Sam 1:20-22, 24-28 <i>Samuel is made over to the Lord for the whole of his life.</i>	Num 6:22-27 <i>They are call down my name on the sons of Israel, and I will bless them.</i>
Responsorial Psalm	Ps 127:1-2, 3, 4-5 r.1 <i>O blessed are those who fear the Lord and walk in his ways!</i>	Ps 104:1-2, 3-4, 5-6, 8-9 r.7.8 <i>He, the Lord, is our God. He remembers his covenant for ever.</i>	Ps 83:2-3, 5-6, 9-10 r.5 <i>They are happy who dwell in your house, O Lord.</i>	Ps 66: 2-3.5. 6. 8. r.2 <i>O God, be gracious and bless us</i>
Second Reading	Col 3:12-21 <i>Family life in the Lord.</i>	Heb 11:8, 11-12, 17-19 <i>The faith of Abraham, Sarah, and Isaac</i>	1 John 3:1-2, 21-24 <i>We are called God's children, and that is what we are.</i>	Gal 4:4-7 <i>God sent his Son, born of a woman.</i>
Gospel Acclamation	Col 3:15. 16 <i>May the peace of Christ reign in your hearts; let the message of Christ find a home with you.</i>	Heb 1:1-2 <i>See Mary, Mother of God</i>	cf Acts 16: 14 <i>Open our heart, O Lord, to accept the words of your Son.</i>	Heb 1: 1-2 <i>At various times in the past and in various different ways, God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets; but in our own time, the last days, he has spoken to us through his Son.</i>
Gospel	Matt 2:13-15, 19-23 <i>Take the child and his mother and escape into Egypt.</i>	Luke 2:22-40 or 2:22, 39-40 (shorter) <i>The child grew filled with wisdom.</i>	Luke 2:41-52 <i>Jesus is found by his parents sitting among the doctors.</i>	Luke 2:16-21 <i>They found Mary and Joseph and the baby. When the eighth day came they gave him the name Jesus.</i>
Antiphons	Holy Family Mary, Mother of God 2nd Sunday Epiphany	A light will shine on us this day; the Lord is born for us; he shall be called Wonderful God, Prince of peace, Father of the world to come, and his kingship will never end. cf. Is 9:2, 6: Lk 1:33 Hail holy mother! The child to whom you gave birth is the King of heaven and earth for ever. When peaceful silence lay over all, and night had run half of her swift course, your all powerful word, O Lord, leaped down from heaven, from your royal throne. The Lord and ruler is coming; kingship is his, and government and power cf. Mal 3:1; 1Chron 19:12	The shepherds hastened to Bethlehem, where they found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger. Luke 2:16 Baruch 3:38 (the following psalms may be used for verses) Ps 126 or Ps 67:2, 5-7, 33-36 Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and for ever. Lk 1:46-55; Ps 92 Ps 92 is 9:1-2, 5-6 Ps 92 John 1:12-20 Heb 13:8 John 1:12 Ps 8 John 1:12 Ps 92 John 1:4-15 We have seen his star in the east, and have come with gifts to adore the Lord. cf. Matt 2:22	Our God has appeared on earth, and lived among men. Baruch 3:38 (the following psalm may be used for verses) Ps 45 Ps 92 or Luke 1: 46-55 or Col 1:12-20 Heb 13:8 John 1:12 Ps 8 John 1:12 Ps 92 John 1:4-15 He gave to all who accepted him the power to become children of God. Ps 92 John 1:12 Ps 8 John 1:12 Ps 95 Ps 95

# Season of Christmas Pastoral Notes

The season of Christmas begins with Evening Prayer I of Christmas, prayed on the evening of 24 December, and concludes with the feast of the Baptism of the Lord, that is, the Sunday after Epiphany or after 6 January. This season celebrates the birth of Christ and his early manifestations, and the Church considers it second only to the annual celebration of the Easter mystery in importance.

In the earliest centuries, the Church had but one feast, the weekly and yearly celebration of the paschal mystery. Soon the Church began to celebrate the birth and manifestation of Christ, the sun of justice (see Malachi 4:2) and light of the world (see John 8:12). This feast coincided with the winter solstice. Since the days of St Leo the Great, the texts of the season have expressed the Church's understanding of Christmas as more than the simple commemoration of a historical event. It is rather the celebration of a mystery, not a separate mystery independent of the paschal mystery, but the beginnings of that mystery of salvation. From the first moments of his human existence, Christ was achieving humanity's redemption. The Christ who was to die and rise for us is recognised as the incarnate Son of God: 'A day of new redemption has dawned, a day of eternal bliss, prepared from of old.'

A high point of the Christmas celebration is the reading of St John's prologue, which proclaims that 'the Word was made flesh and lived among us' (John 1:14). All the readings and prayers lead up to, or echo, this conviction, proclaimed by the great councils of Nicaea, Ephesus, and Chalcedon and celebrated in the Christmas liturgy as the holy exchange, whereby 'we come to share in the divinity of Christ, who humbled himself to share in our humanity.'

The Church celebrates the one true light, the light that banishes darkness.

- The Christmas image of light, of night giving way to day, is reinforced by the sequence of the Mass texts. Texts are provided for Christmas Masses in the evening (vigil), at midnight, at dawn, and during the day. The texts of these several celebrations are meant to be used at the actual time of day indicated by the titles of the celebrations.
- The Gloria is inspired by the song of the angels at the birth of Christ (see Luke 2:14). On Christmas night it is heard for the first time since the beginning of Advent. On this occasion above all others it should be sung by the whole assembly with joy and festive fervour.
- Symbols of the triumph of light over darkness and of life over death, for example, in England and Wales candle-light and evergreens, are traditionally used to decorate the church and assist devotion. The rich images of new light and new life provide many creative possibilities for decorating the church in harmony with the local culture and traditions. The symbol of light recalls the Christian celebration of Easter and helps to link the incarnation with the paschal mystery of salvation.

- The manger scene can be of great assistance to all in recalling the story and the circumstances of Jesus' birth in history and in rekindling a sense of wonder and simplicity. By its design or location, however, it should not displace or overshadow the liturgical modes of the Lord's real presence and activity in word and sacrament, in the assembly and in its ministers.
- It is customary for the figure of the Christ child to be placed in the crib during the celebration of the Midnight Mass. Where parishes anticipate the celebration of Christmas at an afternoon liturgy during the afternoon of Christmas eve it might be better to focus on the emptiness of the crib at that time, encouraging families to return to the church over subsequent days to pray before the completed nativity scene.
- Although the season of Christmas is a time for rejoicing, it is also, for some, a time of pain and sorrow. It is a time when families and individuals are likely to feel more keenly the loss of a recent bereavement. It is a time when tensions within families often express themselves, because of the extended time spent together over the holiday period. Sensitivity to these experiences should find expression in the Christmas liturgies. Parish celebrations of Exposition and Liturgy of the Hours during the Octave of Christmas not only allows for the worthy celebration of the Octave, but also provides breathing places and opportunities for pastoral care and support for those who are experiencing stress at the this time

The **Solemnity of the Epiphany** has its origins in the practice of the Eastern Churches to keep the feast of the manifestation, revelation, of Christ on 6 January. The Eastern feast marked the birth of Christ, the Lord's baptism when he was anointed as Messiah and revealed as God's Son, and the first of Jesus' miracles, as recorded in the Gospel of John (the wedding feast of Cana). When this Eastern feast was adopted by the Church in the West, its focus shifted because of the impact of the existing celebration of the birth of Christ, on 25 December. It remained a feast of revelation, of God's eternal plan of salvation in Christ, manifested as 'the light of all peoples', but was more singly associated with the story of the Magi.

- The Epiphany is celebrated on 6 January or, wherever it is not observed as a day of obligation, on the Sunday falling between 2 and 8 January.
- The custom of keeping Christmas decorations until Epiphany has been celebrated helps to show that Christmas and Epiphany are but two aspects of the same feast. It would be even more appropriate to extend this custom through the celebration of the Baptism of the Lord, the close of the season of Christmas.

## Other texts

- Book of Blessings: *Blessing of Crib*
- Directory on Popular Piety — further information about Feast of *The Holy Family* etc.