

The Readings from the Nine Lessons and Carols

There are many different readings at Christmas and if you go to the Christmas services, including Christmas carol services and concerts, Christingles and Nativity Plays, it is likely that you will hear quite a few of the most common ones.

One of the most loved traditional Christmas festivals is the 'Nine lessons and Carols' which are broadcast every Christmas Eve from Kings College Cambridge (see <http://www.kings.cam.ac.uk/chapel/ninelessons/index.html>)

This traditional service takes nine of the best known and loved bible passages about the birth of Jesus and intersperses them with carols which pick up the theme of the readings.

The readings are given here (note they are given in the traditional 'old' language of the St James version of the Bible, as you would hear them on the radio or TV) with explanations of what they are about. If you are going to church at Christmas for any other service, it is likely that you will come across some of these readings telling us about the birth of Jesus.

First reading

God tells sinful Adam that he has lost the life of Paradise and that his seed will bruise the serpent's head. GENESIS 3

AND they heard the voice of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day: and Adam and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God amongst the trees of the garden. And the Lord God called unto Adam, and said unto him, Where art thou? And he said, I heard thy voice in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself. And he said, Who told thee that thou wast naked? Hast thou eaten of the tree, whereof I commanded thee that thou shouldest not eat? And the man said, The woman whom thou gavest to be with me, she gave me of the tree, and I did eat. And the Lord God said unto the woman, What is this that thou hast done? And the woman said, The serpent beguiled me, and I did eat. And the Lord God said unto the serpent, Because thou hast done this, thou art cursed above all cattle, and above every beast of the field; upon thy belly shalt thou go, and dust shalt thou eat all the days of thy life: and I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel. And unto Adam he said, Because thou hast hearkened unto the voice of thy wife, and hast eaten of the tree, of which I commanded thee, saying, Thou shalt not eat of it: cursed is the ground for thy sake; in sorrow shalt thou eat of it all the days of thy life; thorns also and thistles shall it bring forth to thee; and thou shalt eat the herb of the field; in the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken; for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return.

Thanks be to God.

What's going on?

In the Book of Genesis, the first book of the Bible, we are told how the universe and everything in it came into being, including the creation of human beings. The first humans, Adam and Eve, are given

a perfect world by God, but told that while they can eat anything they want, they must not eat the fruit of a particular tree. The serpent tricks Eve by suggesting that she should eat the fruit and not listen to God, and she does so. When this happens, Adam and Eve are filled with new and difficult knowledge; they realise they are naked and cover themselves up and they also feel ashamed before God and have lost their perfect relationship with him. This passage picks up where Adam and Eve explain what has happened and receive God's judgement upon them for disobeying him. The story tells us how sin and evil came into the world and how it damages and destroys it. It also explains why human life is as it is today instead of being a perfect world, a paradise. The point of starting the readings with this one about Adam and Eve is to prepare us to understand that God sent his own Son Jesus into the world to undo the separation between human beings and God brought about by sin. Through Jesus there is a way back to a perfect relationship with God. So carols are often sung about Jesus as the 'second Adam' who restores things back to the way God intended.

Second reading

God promises to faithful Abraham that in his seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed. GENESIS 22

AND the angel of the LORD called unto Abraham out of heaven the second time, and said, By myself have I sworn, saith the LORD, for because thou hast done this thing, and hast not withheld thy son, thine only son: that in blessing I will bless thee, and in multiplying I will multiply thy seed as the stars of the heaven, and as the sand which is upon the sea shore; and thy seed shall possess the gate of his enemies; and in thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed; because thou hast obeyed my voice.

Thanks be to God.

What's going on?

In this reading we hear about the Hebrew patriarch Abraham. The background for this reading is a test God put before Abraham asking him to sacrifice his son Isaac. Isaac was the most precious thing in the world to Abraham, but he did not want to disobey what God asked of him. Because Abraham was obedient and did not put his own wants first, God spared Isaac and told Abraham that he would be blessed and become the founder of a great nation. So being willing to lose everything, Abraham gained a wonderful future for his people. This reading is chosen because it foreshadows what God himself did in sending Jesus. Jesus comes into the world to be a sacrifice for all the evil and sin that is in the world. Because he did this, human beings can again be in right relationship with God and have the wonderful future with God that he wants for us.

Third Reading

The prophet foretells the coming of the Saviour. ISAIAH 9

THE people that walked in darkness have seen a great light: they that dwell in the land of the shadow of death, upon them hath the light shined. For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government

and peace there shall be no end, upon the throne of David, and upon his kingdom, to order it, and to establish it with judgment and with justice from henceforth even for ever. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will perform this.

Thanks be to God.

What's going on?

In this reading, the prophet Isaiah tells of a wonderful Saviour sent by God to bring a suffering people from darkness to light. Isaiah sees it as a child being born, a son, who will bring peace and justice to the world. The writer of this passage lived long before Jesus, and his ideas were shaped by the history of the suffering of the people of Israel, but his words are prophetic of what God did in Jesus and apply to how we can think of his coming into the world.

Fourth Reading

The peace that Christ will bring is foreshown. ISAIAH 11

AND there shall come forth a rod out of the stem of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots: and the spirit of the LORD shall rest upon him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the LORD; and shall make him of quick understanding in the fear of the LORD. With righteousness shall he judge the poor, and reprove with equity for the meek of the earth. The wolf also shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid; and the calf and the young lion and the fatling together; and a little child shall lead them. And the cow and the bear shall feed; their young ones shall lie down together: and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. And the sucking child shall play on the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put his hand on the cockatrice' den. They shall not hurt nor destroy in all my holy mountain: for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the LORD, as the waters cover the sea.

Thanks be to God.

What's going on?

As in the previous reading, the prophet imagines a person emerging from the people of Israel who will transform the community. That person will be close to God and bring justice and equality for the people of God. So there will be no more war and destruction: the prophet gives us a picture of what that will be like by imagining predator animals and prey existing together without harming each other. Nothing will cause damage or hurt any more because the world will be as God intended it. This passage is chosen as a description of the world Jesus makes possible, if we believe in him and live according to God's will.

Fifth Reading

The angel Gabriel salutes the Blessed Virgin Mary. ST LUKE 1

AND in the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God unto a city of Galilee, named Nazareth, to a virgin espoused to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David; and the virgin's name was Mary. And the angel came in unto her, and said, Hail, thou that art highly favoured, the Lord is with thee: blessed art thou among women. And when she saw him, she was troubled at his saying, and cast in her mind what manner of salutation this should be. And the angel said unto her, Fear not, Mary: for thou hast found favour with God. And, behold, thou shalt conceive in thy womb, and bring forth a son, and shalt call his name Jesus. He shall be great, and shall be called the Son of the Highest: and the Lord God shall give unto him the throne of his father David: and he shall reign over the house of Jacob for ever; and of his kingdom there shall be no end. Then said Mary unto the angel, How shall this be, seeing I know not a man? And the angel answered and said unto her, The Holy Ghost shall come upon thee, and the power of the Highest shall overshadow thee: therefore also that holy thing which shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of God. And Mary said, Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word. And the angel departed from her.

Thanks be to God.

What's going on?

Having prepared us to hear about Jesus' birth, the passages now move into one about how the Virgin Mary was chosen to be Jesus' mother. We are told that an angel, God's messenger, came to Mary, a young woman engaged to a man called Joseph, and told her that she had found special favour with God. Because of this, God asked her to conceive a child, a son, Jesus, who has a unique destiny as the Son of God. Mary asks how this is supposed to happen since she is a virgin, but the angel says that God will make it possible. Mary still has to agree, however. Mary obeys what God asks of her and says that she will become Jesus' mother.

Sixth Reading

St Luke tells of the birth of Jesus. ST LUKE 2

AND it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Cæsar Augustus, that all the world should be taxed. And all went to be taxed, every one into his own city. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judæa, unto the city of David, which is called Bethlehem; (because he was of the house and lineage of David:) to be taxed with Mary his espoused wife, being great with child. And so it was, that, while they were there, the days were accomplished that she should be delivered. And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn.

Thanks be to God

What's going on?

This tells us about the actual birth of Jesus. St Luke sets the birth in the middle of a census, explaining how Jesus (whose family came from Nazareth) ended up being born in Bethlehem. Joseph takes his pregnant wife Mary to Bethlehem to comply with the Roman Emperor's ruling (Israel was occupied by the Romans at this time) and during this process Mary goes into labour and gives birth to Jesus. Because of the large numbers of people coming to the town obeying the order, the inns are full and so Mary has to give birth in a stable, or perhaps a cave in the vicinity and Jesus is wrapped up and placed to sleep in a feeding trough for the animals. The Son of God is born, not to riches and honour, but into poverty and squalour.

Seventh Reading

The shepherds go to the manger. ST LUKE 2

AND there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid. And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord. And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, 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, good will toward men. And it came to pass, as the angels were gone away from them into heaven, the shepherds said one to another, Let us now go even unto Bethlehem, and see this thing which is come to pass, which the Lord hath made known unto us. And they came with haste, and found Mary, and Joseph, and the babe lying in a manger.

Thanks be to God

What's going on?

In another part of the same story, the messenger angel of God visits some shepherds out in the hillsides and tells them that Jesus has been born. They are not special, but ordinary people, but the message to them is to be happy because Jesus has come to be a Saviour for people just like them. The angel tells them that they can see this for themselves, by finding a new born baby, not in a house, or some lovely palace, but in a manger for the animals. The shepherds go to see if what the angel said is true, and so they find Mary and Joseph and Jesus, who is indeed lying in a manger.

Eighth Reading

The wise men are led by the star to Jesus. ST MATTHEW 2

NOW when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judæa in the days of Herod the king, behold, there came wise men from the east to Jerusalem, saying, Where is he that is born King of the Jews? for we have seen his star in the east, and are come to worship him. When Herod the king had heard these things, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him. And when he had gathered all the chief priests and scribes of the people together, he demanded of them where Christ should be born. And they said unto him, In Bethlehem of Judæa: for thus it is written by the prophet, And thou Bethlehem, in the land of Juda, art not the least among the princes of Juda: for out of thee shall come a Governor, that shall rule my people Israel. Then Herod, when he had privily called the wise men, inquired of them

diligently what time the star appeared. And he sent them to Bethlehem, and said, Go and search diligently for the young child; and when ye have found him, bring me word again, that I may come and worship him also. When they had heard the king, they departed; and lo, the star, which they saw in the east, went before them, till it came and stood over where the young child was. When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceeding great joy. And when they were come into the house, they saw the young child with Mary his mother, and fell down, and worshipped him: and when they had opened their treasures, they presented unto him gifts, gold, and frankincense, and myrrh. And being warned of God in a dream that they should not return to Herod, they departed into their own country another way.

Thanks be to God.

What's going on?

This passage, from a different gospel, St Matthew, tells us about a different group of people who heard the good news about Jesus' birth. In this case, some 'wise men' who were probably foreign star-watchers, looking for signs in the night sky, came to King Herod, the local governor, asking about a new 'King of Jews' that they had heard about. They were following a star in the night sky which they understood to be a sign. Herod was upset by this news, thinking they were talking about someone who was going to overthrow him and he wanted to know where this 'king' was going to be born. The wise men tell him that he will be born in Bethlehem to fulfil a saying by the prophet Isaiah. Herod tells the wise men to go and find the child and then tell him where to find him. He says he will come and worship the new-born King, but of course he has no intention of doing anything of the kind. The wise men, like the shepherds, find Jesus, and offer him symbolic gifts: gold, frankincense and myrrh, which stand for kingship, holiness and sacrifice. When they leave, they are warned that they should not go back to Herod and tell him where they found Jesus and so they go home by another route.

Ninth Reading

St John unfolds the great mystery of the Incarnation. ST JOHN 1

IN the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God. All things were made by him; and without him was not any thing made that was made. In him was life; and the life was the light of men. And the light shineth in darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not. There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. The same came for a witness, to bear witness of the light, that all men through him might believe. He was not that light, but was sent to bear witness of that light. That was the true light, which lighteth every man that cometh into the world. He was in the world, and the world was made by him, and the world knew him not. He came unto his own, and his own received him not. But as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name: 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 was made flesh, and dwelt among us, and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only-begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth.

Thanks be to God.

What's going on?

The nine lessons end with the most beautiful and difficult of all the readings about the coming of Jesus into the world. This time the passage comes from the opening of St John's gospel. St John does not tell us about Mary, Joseph and the baby Jesus, but about a kind of God's eye view of the 'Incarnation', - God becoming a human being in the person of Jesus. St John tells that he is a witness to who Jesus really is and that his task is to explain it so that people can believe in Jesus, not as some prophet or miracle worker, but as the Son of God. He starts by telling us that Jesus was with God through all eternity, of God's being. He speaks of Jesus as the 'Word'. So Jesus is God and has existed as God throughout eternity and is one with the creative power of God which brought everything in the universe into being. He then presents Jesus as the light of God, lighting up the truth and getting rid of the darkness of ignorance and wrongdoing. Yet, says St John, even though Jesus was sent from God, he was not recognised and believed in by everyone, but those who did believe and became his disciples, found a way to be reconciled with God and 'born again' as children of God. So, St John concludes, the eternal 'Word' of God became a human being, Jesus. He was a real person, he lived among real people and those who met and followed him throughout his life were convinced beyond any possible doubt that he was truly God come to be a man and experience what it is like to be a human being. This passage summarises the essential gospel, the good news of who Jesus is, and does so in the form of a testimony that asks us to decide what we too believe about who Jesus is.

So these readings offer different kinds of perspectives on the Christmas story: a vision of what God will do to save his people; a story about how God asks a particular woman to be part of his plan to bring salvation to the world; a story about a birth, not into riches, but poverty; witnesses who find a baby in a manger; a background of fear and suspicion that the child is a usurper and will bring revolution; and finally, a promise that those who knew Jesus and lived alongside him, were completely sure beyond doubt that Jesus was God born as a human being, come to save his people in person, and to bring us all eternal life with God, as God intended from the beginning.