



Lectio Divina

— PRAYING THE SCRIPTURES IN ADVENT —

Year C, 2015



Contents

Introduction	4
How to Pray Lectio Divina	5
How to use this booklet	7
1 st Sunday of Advent	8
2 nd Sunday of Advent	13
3 rd Sunday of Advent	18
4 th Sunday of Advent	23
Christmas – Readings for Midnight Mass	28
Pope Francis’ prayer for the Jubilee of Mercy	34



Introduction

Another liturgical year has ebbed away and, like it or not, a new one is upon us. Having come full circle to a new beginning, things nevertheless look somewhat familiar. When we read the ancient Scripture texts assigned for yet another Advent, we might well wonder if there is anything new under the sun. We've heard the texts before; we know the hymns by heart. We've met all the characters of this season and can anticipate what John the Baptist, Paul, Luke, Jeremiah, Isaiah and the other prophets are going to say even before their words are proclaimed in our midst. But this time we are given a new focus by Pope Francis, a Jubilee Year of Mercy. A challenge for us – how do we imagine God's mercy inviting us to a fresh look at our Advent Scriptures?



As we make our way from the church to shopping malls, to work and to play, we quickly realise that we have become veterans of this season. It will be much of the same! We'll make the lists and do the shopping; we'll wrap the presents and decorate the tree. We'll write the cards and cook the Christmas puddings. We'll attend the Carols and parties and, when the Christmas story is read, we'll mouth the words that have become so indelibly engraved upon our memories, “the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us, and we have seen his glory: the glory of an only Son coming from the Father, filled with enduring love.”

In that moment, and by God's grace and mercy, the words we have spoken and heard for decades will challenge us to put aside what may have become routine and awaken us to the ever startling and fresh newness of God, present and alive among us!

The difference between the passing of yet another year, like so many other years, and the promise of a new day dawning is Jesus Christ, the One who reveals the mystery of God's merciful love. From the moment the incarnate word became flesh and blood, the course of human history was forever altered. God's gift of Jesus has communicated new meaning and new direction to every individual human story. History, because of God's word to us in Jesus, is no longer a cyclic repetition of similar events but a linear movement with a beginning, a purpose and a goal, all of which originates and are subsumed in God.

Each Advent signals a return to the beginning but it is always a new beginning. Our neighbourhoods of grace start all over again each Advent. In the midst of a world where God is seldom felt, we yearn to experience God of mercy again, *as if for the first time*.

As we read and listen to our ancestors in the faith, we trust that memory and hope will come alive; this trust is not misplaced because the word, as it is proclaimed, is a living entity, speaking a *new* message, in a *new* manner, in a *new* year, to a people who long to be new again. Each Sunday of Advent (as well as each Sunday of the year) the Word calls the gathered assembly to reach beyond our routine and move from cyclical rehearsal to personal breakthrough.

How to Pray Lectio Divina

A reading and reflection on the Scriptures which leads to prayer and transformation of life.

Reading – getting to know the text (senses)

The first step is to come to know the text in its entirety. We look at it as a whole, embracing all the elements of it. What is the inspired human author trying to tell us in the text? This reading is the beginning of a process that leads to meditation, prayer and the transformation of life.

- Take in all the elements of the text.
- Be aware of context, related texts, quotes.
- Who are key characters; what are key words?
- Apply all that you know about the text.
- Don't choose any one thing to work with at this stage.

Meditation – engaging with the text, making it your own (reason)

Here we begin to reflect on the text. We approach the text not from its literal meaning, but from a theological point of view. What does it say about the God who speaks to me, and how I am to respond to that God? The text here acts like a mirror; it reveals to us our own faith journey and what we need to do to live it better.

What does the text tell me:

- about the God who speaks?
- about responding to that God?
- about my faith life?
- about what I need to do to transform my faith life?

Prayer – let prayer emerge from your working with the text (will)

Our prayer here arises out of meditation. We are humbled and have become aware of our need for God to help us. We pray for the grace to put into practice our insight into what we need to do to live our faith life more fully

- Our prayer stems from our reading / meditation.
- Meditation humbles us, so we turn to God in our need.
- We seek the grace we need to do what we must to transform our life.
- We acknowledge that alone we can do nothing.
- “I can do all things in him who strengthens me.” (cf. Philippians 4:13)

Action – throughout the day

To help us throughout the day to focus on our particular insight we now choose a word, phrase or sentence. By repeating it during the day we are reminded of what we need to do, and remember that God gives to us the help that we need to do it. The goal of *lectio divina* is transformation of life, so this continuing repetition is like a leaven that brings about the transformation.

- Now choose a word, phrase, sentence.
- Bring it to mind frequently during the day.
- Let it recapture the experience of your *lectio*.
- Use it especially in situations relating to your *lectio insight*.
- “Daily and hourly till the soil of the heart with the Gospel plough.” (St John Cassian)

Shared *lectio* involves hearing the word together, sharing one's initial insights into the text, and then, after a private time for meditation, sharing something of those deeper reflections. After a time of prayer, the text chosen for daily reflection may also be shared.



How to use this Booklet

This booklet invites you to prayerfully and meditatively reflect on the Sunday readings during Advent and select readings from Christmas.

To find out more about *lectio divina* and accessing this resource via mobile devices, please visit www.dbb.org.au

Throughout this booklet, quotes are included from the official proclamation of the Jubilee Year of Mercy, *Misericordiae Vultus* ('The Face of Mercy'). These are offered to promote further reflection as we begin our journey in this Holy Year.

This booklet is an instrument that can be used in a variety of ways. Please use it in whatever way suits you best, either individually or within a group context.

Reflections on this Year of Mercy

1. Jesus Christ is the face of the Father's mercy. These words might well sum up the mystery of the Christian faith. Mercy has become living and visible in Jesus of Nazareth, reaching its culmination in him. The Father, "rich in mercy" (Eph 2:4), after having revealed his name to Moses as "a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness" (Ex 34:6), has never ceased to show, in various ways throughout history, his divine nature. In the "fullness of time" (Gal 4:4), when everything had been arranged according to his plan of salvation, he sent his only Son into the world, born of the Virgin Mary, to reveal his love for us in a definitive way. Whoever sees Jesus sees the Father (cf. Jn 14:9). Jesus of Nazareth, by his words, his actions, and his entire person reveals the mercy of God.

2. We need constantly to contemplate the mystery of mercy. It is a wellspring of joy, serenity, and peace. Our salvation depends on it. Mercy: the word reveals the very mystery of the Most Holy Trinity. Mercy: the ultimate and supreme act by which God comes to meet us. Mercy: the fundamental law that dwells in the heart of every person who looks sincerely into the eyes of his brothers and sisters on the path of life. Mercy: the bridge that connects God and man, opening our hearts to the hope of being loved forever despite our sinfulness.

3. At times we are called to gaze even more attentively on mercy so that we may become a more effective sign of the Father's action in our lives...

Misericordiae Vultus, ('The Face of Mercy') 11 April 2015

— THE HABIT OF —

Prayer



1st Sunday of Advent

Jeremiah 33:14-16

The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will fulfil the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah. In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David; and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety. And this is the name by which it will be called: "The LORD is our righteousness."

1 Thessalonians 3:12 – 4:2

And may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, just as we abound in love for you. And may he so strengthen your hearts in holiness that you may be blameless before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints.

Finally, brothers and sisters, we ask and urge you in the Lord Jesus that, as you learned from us how you ought to live and to please God (as, in fact, you are doing), you should do so more and more. For you know what instructions we gave you through the Lord Jesus.

Luke 21:25-28, 34-36

"There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in a cloud' with power and great glory. Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near."

"Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day catch you unexpectedly, like a trap. For it will come upon all who live on the face of the whole earth. Be alert at all times, praying that you may have the strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of Man."

Reflection

As we prepare for the great miracle of Christmas, in the busy-ness of our lives, Pope Francis invites us to reflect on the Mercy of God at work in the lives of those we see in the Sacred Scriptures and be open to allowing this God to encounter us with the gift of mercy. Amidst the mad whirl of parties, shopping, sending out cards, planning meals and holidays, do we take time to engage with our God and open our hearts to God's Mercy manifested in God's Son, Jesus the Christ. Do we recognise that at Christmas we celebrate that greatest of grace filled moments, when our God became one like us, took on our humanity, so that we may share in God's divinity, so that we may call God, Abba, Father?

As we prepare for Christmas we look to the past, to the Mercy of God at work in salvation history, through to the present; how the Mercy of God is at work now in our daily lives, and to the future, how, with God's Mercy, all people will come to know and praise God.

In our first reading we reflect on the past, happenings which took place over 2,500 years ago. We reflect on what the prophet Jeremiah told the people of God over 500 years before Jesus was born. Jeremiah writes that God "will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David; and he shall execute justice and righteousness." We know that Jesus is that righteous Branch. We know that through the Grace of God, Jesus took on our humanity and preached a message of justice and righteousness in all lands, a message of peace for all, in all times.

In our second reading we reflect on the present, how we are to live today. St Paul tells the Thessalonians, and us, to live as lovers of God and of each other. Grace is a five lettered word for love. Love is a four lettered word for God. God is love, pure love. Through the Grace of God we receive God's love and are asked to love God and to love each other. God so loved the world that God gave us God's only Son, Jesus, who is the reason for the season.

In the Gospel we reflect on the future. Jesus, the Son of God, the Christ, the Messiah, speaks of the end of time when we will see "the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and glory". Through the Grace of God, Jesus the Christ, the Son of Man, has dominion over all things including death. Through the Grace of God, the Word of God, Jesus the Son of Man, "will not pass away". Jesus tells us to be on our guard, to be alert and to pray that we "have the strength...to stand before the Son of Man".

What an amazing panorama is painted in the Scriptures of the end times - the Son of Man coming on a cloud in glory, we standing before the Son of Man and witnessing the passing of dominion over all things to the Father. What an incredible moment this will be when we experience the mercy and compassion of this God in whom we have lived and moved and had our being!

Let us pray that through God's mercy we may live as lovers of God and of all of God's people. Let us pray that in the busy-ness of this season, we take time to recognise the Mercy of God in our lives.

Jubilee Year of Mercy Questions

First Sunday of Advent – The Habit of Prayer

Key Passage: *“Be alert at all times, praying that you may have the strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of Man”* (Luke 21:36)

- What have been the strengths of your prayer life?
- What habit of prayer could you strengthen during this Advent season?
- How has the habit of regular prayer helped you with the challenges you face daily?

Further reflections on this Year of Mercy

4. I have chosen the date of 8 December because of its rich meaning in the recent history of the Church. In fact, I will open the Holy Door on the fiftieth anniversary of the closing of the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council. The Church feels a great need to keep this event alive. With the Council, the Church entered a new phase of her history. The Council Fathers strongly perceived, as a true breath of the Holy Spirit, a need to talk about God to men and women of their time in a more accessible way. The walls which for too long had made the Church a kind of fortress were torn down and the time had come to proclaim the Gospel in a new way. It was a new phase of the same evangelization that had existed from the beginning. It was a fresh undertaking for all Christians to bear witness to their faith with greater enthusiasm and conviction. The Church sensed a responsibility to be a living sign of the Father's love in the world.

We recall the poignant words of Saint John XXIII when, opening the Council, he indicated the path to follow: "Now the Bride of Christ wishes to use the medicine of mercy rather than taking up arms of severity... The Catholic Church, as she holds high the torch of Catholic truth at this Ecumenical Council, wants to show herself a loving mother to all; patient, kind, moved by compassion and goodness toward her separated children". Blessed Paul VI spoke in a similar vein at the closing of the Council: "We prefer to point out how charity has been the principal religious feature of this Council... the old story of the Good Samaritan has been the model of the spirituality of the Council... a wave of affection and admiration flowed from the Council over the modern world of humanity. Errors were condemned, indeed, because charity demanded this no less than did truth, but for individuals themselves there was only admonition, respect and love. Instead of depressing diagnoses, encouraging remedies; instead of direful predictions, messages of trust issued from the Council to the present-day world. The modern world's values were not only respected but honoured, its efforts approved, its aspirations purified and blessed... Another point we must stress is this: all this rich teaching is channelled in one direction, the service of mankind, of every condition, in every weakness and need".

PRAYER OF

Repentance



2nd Sunday of Advent

Baruch 5:1-9

*Take off the garment of your sorrow and affliction, O Jerusalem,
and put on for ever the beauty of the glory from God.
Put on the robe of the righteousness that comes from God;
put on your head the diadem of the glory of the Everlasting;
for God will show your splendour everywhere under heaven.
For God will give you evermore the name,
'Righteous Peace, Godly Glory'.
Arise, O Jerusalem, stand upon the height;
look towards the east,
and see your children gathered from west and east
at the word of the Holy One,
rejoicing that God has remembered them.
For they went out from you on foot,
led away by their enemies;
but God will bring them back to you,
carried in glory, as on a royal throne.
For God has ordered that every high mountain and the everlasting hills be made low
and the valleys filled up, to make level ground,
so that Israel may walk safely in the glory of God.
The woods and every fragrant tree
have shaded Israel at God's command.
For God will lead Israel with joy,
in the light of his glory,
with the mercy and righteousness that come from him.*

Philippians 1:4-6, 8-11

I thank my God every time I remember you, constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you, because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now. I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ.

For God is my witness, how I long for all of you with the compassion of Christ Jesus.

And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you to determine what is best, so that in the day of Christ you may be pure and

blameless, having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God.

Luke 3:1-6

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah, “The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.’”

Reflection

In Baruch 5:1-9 the actions of God have their purpose in us. God’s motives involve transforming the world and our very selves. The glory of God will be manifested in the wondrous workings around us, in the joy that bursts into our lives, and the peace that is found near and far. It is the grace of God we are called to recognise this Advent week.

God has begun a good work among us, in Jesus. This work will continue in us. It is the Good News of hope and salvation, a work that will transform not only our way of being and living, but will reap rewards when the domain of God, that is the entire world and all in it, give glory.

John the Baptist recognised the necessity for change, the call to transform and to call forth the great glory of God. John was the forerunner to Jesus and the prophet who continued the Old Testament call for God’s glory to reign. We are all John the Baptists in our own way. Called to leave the comfort and security of our present lives and to go and immerse ourselves this Advent, in the knowing of God. To participate in the renewal of life, where hope comes alive, goodness abounds and where glory to God is given.

God’s purpose in Jesus was to make known to all people the mercy and love of God. Christmas is a reminder of the fulfilment of God’s promise for all humanity. Advent reminds us of this and prepares us to continue this good news of Jesus for all time.

The Readings for this Advent Sunday are to prepare us for the wonders of God’s glory. Yet the great glory that is manifested in overflowing compassion and revealed in peace that extends throughout the entire earth, can only be fully achieved though

our participation. Like John the Baptist, who is remembered today in the Advent preparation, we are invited to become ‘pure and blameless, having produced the harvest of righteousness’ as the Reading from Phil 1:10-11 states. Advent, leading to Christmas, is preparation time, to get ready, so Christmas can be fully experienced, enjoyed and lived out with God Immanuel, who came to be with us and who lives in us, so that we may live out the glory of God to others.

So perhaps we can consider this Advent week, and through this Year of Mercy, how are we, like John the Baptist, participants in the proclamation of the Good News? How can God’s mercy be manifested in us and throughout the world?

Advent is a time when the spirit of John the Baptist calls us to purification and prayer. His is a baptism, Luke tells us, of *metanoia*. The word literally means a turn-around. A time of mercy. Of course, the turning here is a turning from sin. *Metanoia* is a good image also for turning from gloom to joy, from desperation to anticipation, from darkness to the light of the world.

We should let John the Baptist take charge of this Advent, unnerving as he is. We should let him encourage us to purify our hearts. And we should listen to the invitation he and the whole prophetic tradition offers: turn around to look east.

It is Advent, and Christmas is approaching. We can prepare once more to wait in hope, revel in the wondrous glory of God among us and, in the Year of Mercy, to live out fully our calling, as John the Baptist did.

Jubilee Year of Mercy Questions

Second Sunday of Advent – Prayer of Repentance

Key Passage: *“John went into the entire region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins” (Luke 3:3)*

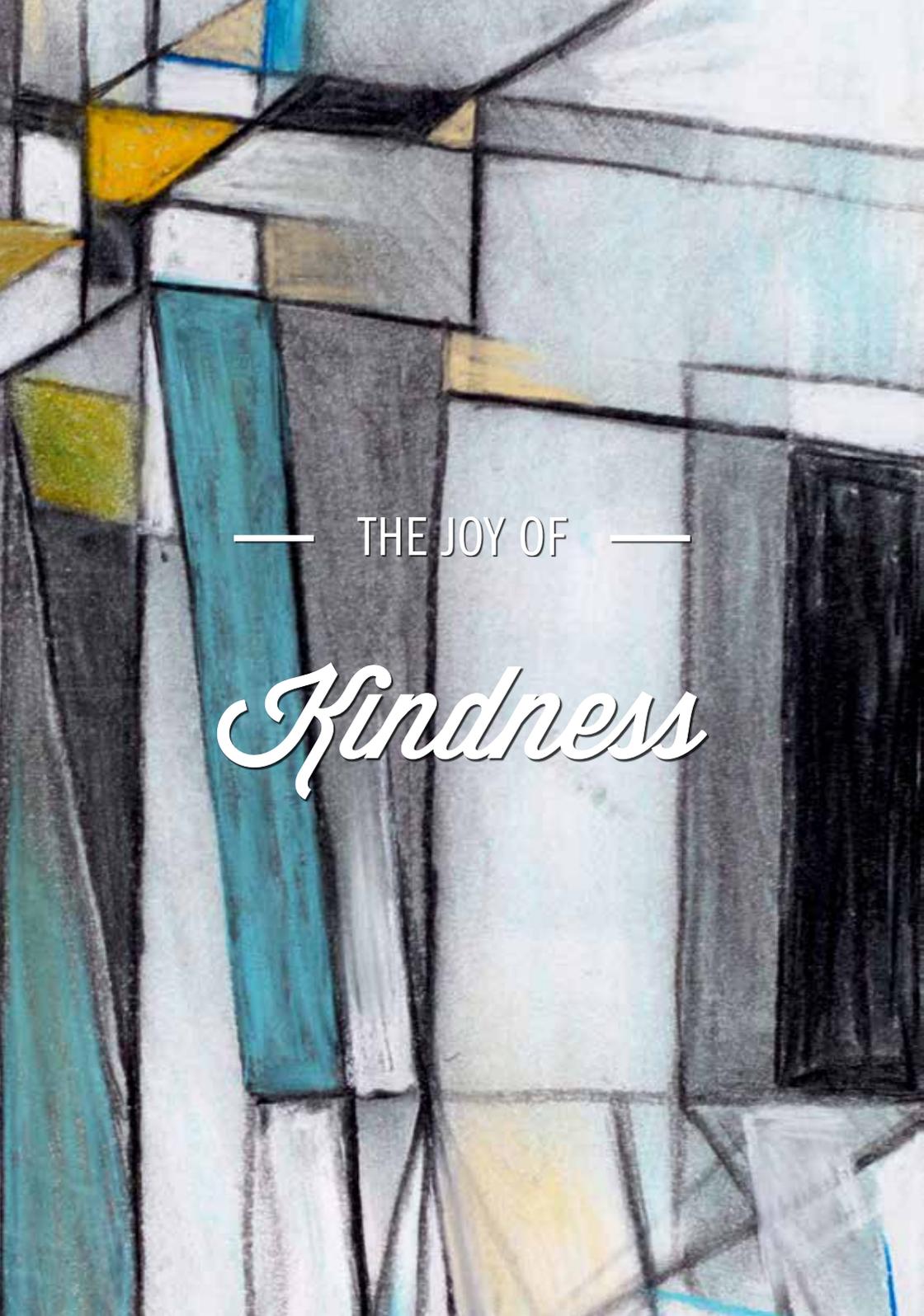
- In what areas of your life do you need God’s mercy and forgiveness right now?

- What Advent practice would help you in expressing your repentance and seeking God's mercy?

Further reflections on this Year of Mercy

6. "It is proper to God to exercise mercy, and he manifests his omnipotence particularly in this way". Saint Thomas Aquinas' words show that God's mercy, rather than a sign of weakness, is the mark of his omnipotence. For this reason the liturgy, in one of its most ancient collects, has us pray: "O God, who reveal your power above all in your mercy and forgiveness ..." Throughout the history of humanity, God will always be the One who is present, close, provident, holy, and merciful.

"Patient and merciful." These words often go together in the Old Testament to describe God's nature. His being merciful is concretely demonstrated in his many actions throughout the history of salvation where his goodness prevails over punishment and destruction. In a special way the Psalms bring to the fore the grandeur of his merciful action: "He forgives all your iniquity, he heals all your diseases, he redeems your life from the pit, he crowns you with steadfast love and mercy" (Ps 103:3-4). Another psalm, in an even more explicit way, attests to the concrete signs of his mercy: "He executes justice for the oppressed; he gives food to the hungry. The Lord sets the prisoners free; the Lord opens the eyes of the blind. The Lord lifts up those who are bowed down; the Lord loves the righteous. The Lord watches over the sojourners, he upholds the widow and the fatherless; but the way of the wicked he brings to ruin" (Ps 146:7-9). Here are some other expressions of the Psalmist: "He heals the broken-hearted, and binds up their wounds... The Lord lifts up the downtrodden, he casts the wicked to the ground" (Ps 147:3, 6). In short, the mercy of God is not an abstract idea, but a concrete reality with which he reveals his love as of that of a father or a mother, moved to the very depths out of love for their child. It is hardly an exaggeration to say that this is a "visceral" love. It gushes forth from the depths naturally, full of tenderness and compassion, indulgence and mercy.



— THE JOY OF —

Kindness

3rd Sunday of Advent

Zephaniah 3:14-18

Sing aloud, O daughter Zion; shout, O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter Jerusalem! The Lord has taken away the judgments against you, he has turned away your enemies. The king of Israel, the Lord, is in your midst; you shall fear disaster no more. On that day it shall be said to Jerusalem: Do not fear, O Zion; do not let your hands grow weak. The Lord, your God, is in your midst, a warrior who gives victory; he will rejoice over you with gladness, he will renew you in his love; he will exult over you with loud singing as on a day of festival.

Philippians 4:4-7

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Luke 3:10-18

And the crowds asked him, "What then should we do?" In reply he said to them, "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise." Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, "Teacher, what should we do?" He said to them, "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you." Soldiers also asked him, "And we, what should we do?" He said to them, "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages."

As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, John answered all of them by saying, "I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire." So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people.

Reflection

Like young and ardent lovers whose mutual caring and admiration leads each to regard no sacrifice as too costly or any request as unable to be fulfilled, so also are converts to the faith. Whether they be new or veteran converts, returning yet again to the Lord, their enthusiasm is palpable. Fresh from their encounter with the truth and thus having accepted to be transformed and redirected by it, the zeal of these neophytes is comparable to a wellspring waiting to be tapped or a cache of crude oil gushing upward unrestrained through the earth's surface. Because they are eager and willing to place their time, talent and treasure at the service of the community, converts represent a most valuable resource. For its part, the community becomes responsible for channelling but not stifling, for directing but not squelching, paid for encouraging but not abusing the gifts with which it has been blessed. To assist the gathered assembly in this regard, our readings for this third Sunday of Advent offer us a wise message of counsel and guidance.

From the prophet Zephaniah, in the first reading, perennial, advent converts learn that the God who calls each of us to conversion remains in our midst, continually renewing, with gladness and love, all who turn toward the truth. In the Letter to the Philippians Paul also calls the converted to rejoice in the nearness of God who hears prayers and whose peace safeguards our hearts and minds. The reading taken from Luke's gospel finds John the Baptist teaching a lesson that keeps the enthusiasm of the convert practical and in touch with the reality of the human experience.

In the course of his preaching near the Jordan, John attracted a variety of diverse converts. Ordinary people moved by his message and wishing to respond to it asked "What ought we to do?" Tax collectors, similarly motivated, said "What are we to do?" Soldiers, also, wanted to know how they could translate their willingness to change into action, "What about us?"

If their frank and eager questions are any indication of their zeal, then those who were drawn by John's message would probably have agreed to *anything* he asked of them. But John did not issue Herculean challenges; he simply directed the energies and generosity of his questioners toward the routine circumstances of their everyday lives. God does not require the extraordinary or bizarre; rather, blessedness is to be found in the ordinary and even in the banal.

If John's message were to be contemporised, we can almost hear him telling spouses to express the sincerity of their conversion to God by a renewal of their love and devotion to one another. Parents: revere your children. Children: respect your parents. Brothers and sisters: let sibling rivalry yield to mutual caring. Teachers: value your students, and students: realise that your mentors have precious wisdom to impart. Doctors, nurses: treat your patients with attentiveness and understanding. Lawyers: be defenders of justice

for all. Lawmakers: listen to the needs of your constituents. Constituents: exercise your right to vote justly. Workers: do a just day's work. Employers: pay fair wages without discrimination; do not foster policies that work against family life or values.

In a word, John would have his listeners direct their immediate zeal of their conversion into the long-term demands of daily living. Aware that this poses no easy challenge, Karl Rahner once observed that everyday morality is not so easy after all. To keep plodding ahead through a dull, tedious, everyday existence can often be more difficult than a unique deed whose heroism makes us run the danger of pride and self-satisfaction. Everyday morality means a life spent in duties and in the constant and daily renewed will to be just and good to others; it demands strength and commitment whereby we do not allow ourselves to sink into tired resignation because of what seems to be the ordinariness of our day. Such a life of seeming ordinariness becomes liveable and, even blessed, when we become aware that conversion does not happen only at one specific moment in time; rather, it becomes the hidden principle permeating the direction of life as a whole.

Although we are now well into the season of Advent, there is still time to ask the question: "What ought we to do?" There is still time to channel our eager willingness to respond to that question into the large and small, significant and insignificant moments of each day where we meet the Christ whose face we are invited to contemplate.

Jubilee Year of Mercy Questions

Third Sunday of Advent – The Joy of Kindness

Key Passage: *"Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone."* (Philippians 4:4-5)

- To whom have your past acts of mercy and forgiveness brought you joy?

— OBEDIENCE TO —

God's will



4th Sunday of Advent

Micah 5:1-4

But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days. Therefore he shall give them up until the time when she who is in labour has brought forth; then the rest of his kindred shall return to the people of Israel. And he shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of the LORD, in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God. And they shall live secure, for now he shall be great to the ends of the earth; and he shall be the one of peace.

Hebrews 10:5-10

Consequently, when Christ came into the world, he said, "Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired, but a body you have prepared for me; in burnt offerings and sin offerings you have taken no pleasure. Then I said, 'See, God, I have come to do your will, O God' (in the scroll of the book it is written of me)."

When he said above, "You have neither desired nor taken pleasure in sacrifices and offerings and burnt offerings and sin offerings" (these are offered according to the law), then he added, "See, I have come to do your will." He abolishes the first in order to establish the second. And it is by God's will that we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.

Luke 1:39-45

In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord."

Reflection

We are so close to the birth of Jesus, with only a few days to go. It is hot and most of us are making our last minute preparations to ensure that Christmas Day runs smoothly. I hope that among all these busy times you have had time to just be, to wait, and that during Advent, you have had time to prepare. The prophet Micah in the reading today is about preparation; he tells of the coming of Jesus, with Jesus coming as a shepherd for all. The image of Jesus as shepherd, and we as his sheep, sits well with most people.

This Sunday we also read of the Visitation, from Luke's gospel. This is a piece of Scripture that most of us are familiar with, and as one of the Joyful mysteries of the Rosary, a story we may know well from when we pray the Rosary. This story follows on from Mary finding out she is to be the mother of Jesus, and Elizabeth finding out she is to be the mother of John. Both women have been touched by the Holy Spirit. Mary is concerned for Elizabeth and goes to visit her, but it is Elizabeth who is filled with joy at the sight of Mary. This reading is about trust. Elizabeth, although quite old and unexpectedly pregnant, and Mary, to be the mother of Jesus, also, unexpectedly pregnant, are probably a little unsure about what has happened to them and what the months ahead hold. They are examples of great trust in God; they don't fully understand, but they have faith and trust in God. Often in our lives we are also at a point of indecision, questioning, bewilderment - we need to also have the same trust and faith that Mary and Elizabeth showed.

John was Jesus' greatest prophet. Even from when he was in the womb, he was aware of Jesus as the Scriptures tell us - "the baby in her womb leaped for joy". Elizabeth calls Mary blessed, not only because she is to become the mother of Jesus, but also to show the incredible faith Mary had.

Let's pray as this Advent season draws to a close, and the year of Mercy continues to unfold, that the revelation of God's love and mercy in Jesus becomes the model for all of us who believe in him. And, in these days before Christmas, we might strive to stay close to Mary, God's tabernacle, the bearer of Mercy into the world. Even in the frenetic preparations before Christmas, we might take time to rest with her. Ultimately, she shows us who we are, what we carry and what we ourselves can bear to the world.

Further reflections on this Year of Mercy

8. With our eyes fixed on Jesus and his merciful gaze, we experience the love of the Most Holy Trinity. The mission Jesus received from the Father was that of revealing the mystery of divine love in its fullness. “God is love” (1 Jn 4:8,16), John affirms for the first and only time in all of Holy Scripture. This love has now been made visible and tangible in Jesus’ entire life. His person is nothing but love, a love given gratuitously. The relationships he forms with the people who approach him manifest something entirely unique and unrepeatable. The signs he works, especially in favour of sinners, the poor, the marginalized, the sick, and the suffering, are all meant to teach mercy. Everything in him speaks of mercy. Nothing in him is devoid of compassion.



Christmas

— READINGS FOR MIDNIGHT MASS —

Christmas – Midnight Mass

Isaiah 9:1-7

But there will be no gloom for those who were in anguish. In the former time he brought into contempt the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the latter time he will make glorious the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations.

*The people who walked in darkness
have seen a great light;
those who lived in a land of deep darkness—
on them light has shined.
You have multiplied the nation,
you have increased its joy;
they rejoice before you
as with joy at the harvest,
as people exult when dividing plunder.
For the yoke of their burden,
and the bar across their shoulders,
the rod of their oppressor,
you have broken as on the day of Midian.
For all the boots of the tramping warriors
and all the garments rolled in blood
shall be burned as fuel for the fire.
For a child has been born for us,
a son given to us;
authority rests upon his shoulders;
and he is named
Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.
His authority shall grow continually,
and there shall be endless peace
for the throne of David and his kingdom.
He will establish and uphold it
with justice and with righteousness
from this time onwards and for evermore.
The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this.*

Titus 2:11-14

For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all, training us to renounce impiety and worldly passions, and in the present age to live lives that are self-controlled, upright, and godly, while we wait for the blessed hope and the manifestation of the glory of our great God and Saviour, Jesus Christ. He it is who gave himself for us that he might redeem us from all iniquity and purify for himself a people of his own who are zealous for good deeds.

Luke 2:1-14

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth 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 heaven,
and on earth peace among those whom he favours!'*

Reflection

The Gospel reading at Midnight Mass recalls the familiar story of Joseph and Mary returning to Joseph's ancestral home in Bethlehem to enrol in the census. With no room for them at the inn, Joseph and Mary must stay in the animals' shelter where Mary gives birth to the Lord Jesus, wraps him in swaddling clothes and lays him in a manger – a scene that is less romantic and more humble. Or perhaps it is romantic as the Incarnate Word romances us in the ordinariness of our lives. We celebrate the incarnation of God 2000 years ago but also celebrate his incarnate life here in the midst of our own day-to-day existence, even as we look forward to his final coming.

A story is told that from a medieval English town Rabbi Isaac, a holy visionary, travelled to the baron's castle to see him and his wife. "I have been given a divine secret and commanded by God to share it with you. You may never speak of this again." They agreed. "The secret is that the messiah is hidden among us. That is all I am permitted to say."

The baron knew that Christ had already come, so this must mean that it is the end time. He had one request: "Please, Rabbi, tell the monks of our monastery, for they must hear this great news." The rabbi agreed, and when he met the monks he swore them to secrecy: "The messiah is hidden among us, but you must not speak of this again, even among yourselves, until he chooses to reveal himself."

Now this monastery was in very poor shape. The monks were fond of quarrels, gossip and striving for authority. "Who is he?" they wondered among themselves. Given the humility of divine love, some thought perhaps it was the strange brother who tended the garden. Others imagined it may be the abbot. It could even be the monk next to them who sang off key. Speculation ran riot. So they began to treat each other as though he could be the messiah. You never know.

The baron and his wife privately speculated as well. They wondered about each other, about the stable hand, the village fool...It could be anyone! Not surprisingly, the baron lived quite well, while the peasants' lives were little more than hardship. He and his wife sold their tapestries, fine clothes and many sets of dishes. They shared their proceeds with those in need. They also transformed part of their castle into a hospice to care for those most dangerously ill. Who knows if that peasant they washed and cared for might be the hidden messiah. The people of the realm had never experienced such generosity by their lord and lady. They in turn became even more loyal, and began to treat each other differently. Thefts became unknown, doors remained unlocked, and strangers no longer found suspicion but hospitality.

News of the monastery got back to the people. The brothers never prayed or worked with such love and devotion. They were so happy, so blessed, knowing that the messiah was hidden among them. Some people even said that on a dark, clear night you could see the monastery itself radiate light.

The monks aged and died, to be replaced by other young men, some zealous and others less so. The baron and his wife died and they were replaced by their children and grandchildren, as was the case with all the townspeople. Rabbi Isaac died and was replaced several times over by other rabbis.

Generations came and went. Bickering returned, and sometimes suspicion replaced trust. The baron's grandson was not the man his grandfather was. And they all looked back to that time, now many years ago, when it wasn't that way. "Why has all this changed?" they sometimes wondered. "What secret did they know that we do not?"

The secret – but you must not tell anyone – the messiah is hidden among us!

Jubilee Year of Mercy Questions

Feast of Christmas

Key Passage: “He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him” (John 1: 11)

- If Jesus were to be born today, do you think you would accept him and follow him? Why or why not?

- How does consumerism and hype surrounding Christmas get in the way of your understanding of the meaning of Jesus’ birth?

Concluding reflections on this Year of Mercy

5. The Jubilee year will close with the liturgical Solemnity of Christ the King on 20 November 2016. On that day, as we seal the Holy Door, we shall be filled, above all, with a sense of gratitude and thanksgiving to the Most Holy Trinity for having granted us an extraordinary time of grace. We will entrust the life of the Church, all humanity, and the entire cosmos to the Lordship of Christ, asking him to pour out his mercy upon us like the morning dew, so that everyone may work together to build a brighter future. How much I desire that the year to come will be steeped in mercy, so that we can go out to every man and woman, bringing the goodness and tenderness of God! May the balm of mercy reach everyone, both believers and those far away, as a sign that the Kingdom of God is already present in our midst!

Pope Francis' prayer for the Jubilee of Mercy

Lord Jesus Christ,

*you have taught us to be merciful like the heavenly Father,
and have told us that whoever sees you sees Him.*

Show us your face and we will be saved.

*Your loving gaze freed Zacchaeus and Matthew
from being enslaved by money;
the adulteress and Magdalene from
seeking happiness only in created things;
made Peter weep after his betrayal, and
assured Paradise to the repentant thief.*

*Let us hear, as if addressed to each one of us,
the words that you spoke to the Samaritan woman:
"If you knew the gift of God!"*

*You are the visible face of the invisible Father,
of the God who manifests his power
above all by forgiveness and mercy:
let the Church be your visible face
in the world, its Lord risen and glorified.*

*You willed that your ministers would
also be clothed in weakness in order that they
may feel compassion for those in ignorance and error:
let everyone who approaches them feel
sought after, loved, and forgiven by God.*

*Send your Spirit and consecrate every one of us
with its anointing, so that the Jubilee of Mercy
may be a year of grace from the Lord,
and your Church, with renewed enthusiasm,
may bring good news to the poor, proclaim liberty
to captives and the oppressed, and restore sight to the blind.*

*We ask this through the intercession of Mary, Mother of Mercy,
you who live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit
for ever and ever. Amen.*



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