



Lectia Divina

PRAYING THE SCRIPTURES IN ADVENT
Year A, 2016

PREPARING THE WAY

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Introduction - *The Advent of our Christian Lives*

The season of Advent places before us the expectancy of Christian life itself. We anticipate together the birth of Jesus, the man who is God, in the city of Bethlehem to a woman named Mary.

Indeed, as persons baptised into this life and sharing this life as disciples, we continuously anticipate God's action and intercession in the intimacy of our own lives.



We are a people who await God's plan for our life to unfold and we await this future in a particular way, not by a passive indifference or by being carried into distraction, but by choosing to live each day in faith with a trust and confidence in God's abundant love and embracing care, come what may. In short, our waiting for the future is marked by hope.

As we journey through the weeks of Advent in anticipation of the great Christmas Feast, the mystery of the Incarnation, we are presented with the choice as to *how* we might wait with hope.

As our reflections on the readings of Advent underscore, our waiting is to be watchful and attentive to the signs of God's coming and his invitation to live in his ways. We are called to prepare ourselves for Christ's arrival by a change of heart and, in the way of John the Baptist, by announcing the Good News of God's favour and blessing in the One who comes.

In radical contrast to the Bethlehem inn of the nativity scene, we are to prepare and 'make room' for the Christ-child in the depths of our own heart, opening a space for him to grow and shape us from within. This is especially so in a world that does not always recognise his coming or open its doors to his presence. As the ancients recognised in that congested inn, full on account of the Census of Quirinius, we ourselves risk closing ourselves off from what God offers when our hearts are occupied and crowded with conventional, merely material concerns.

With the arrival of this child arrives our call to a greater authenticity, the call to put aside distraction and the commotion of the year's end and instead look into the countenance of the One who is our life, who is both the way and our destination, and to begin to truly live in him. In short, the birth of Christ is the birth of ourselves; the birth of his humanity is the birth of ours, if only we allow it to be, not only in principle but in fact.

The birth of this man-who-is-God announces a new creation, *our* new creation, and he comes as the concrete 'pledge' that union between the divine life and human life is not only possible but the one and total purpose of our existence.

This Advent might we prepare well, make room for the One who comes, and respond with open and waiting hearts to God's embrace given in Jesus Christ.

Daniel Ang
Director, Office for Evangelisation

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 and Epiphany. An outline of the meditative and prayerful reflection of *lectio divina* is offered at the beginning of this booklet.

To find out more about *lectio divina*, including a video clip which models the process, please visit www.dbb.org.au

This booklet is an instrument that can be used in a variety of ways. Please use it in whatever way suits you best.

Advent Prayer

Lord Jesus,
Master of both the light and the darkness,
send your Holy Spirit upon our preparation for Christmas.

We who have so much to do
seek quiet spaces to hear your voice each day.

We who are anxious over many things
look forward to your coming among us.
We who are blessed in so many ways long for
the complete joy of your Kingdom.

We whose hearts are heavy
seek the joy of your presence.

We are your people,
walking in darkness yet seeking the light.

To you we say
“Come, Lord Jesus”.

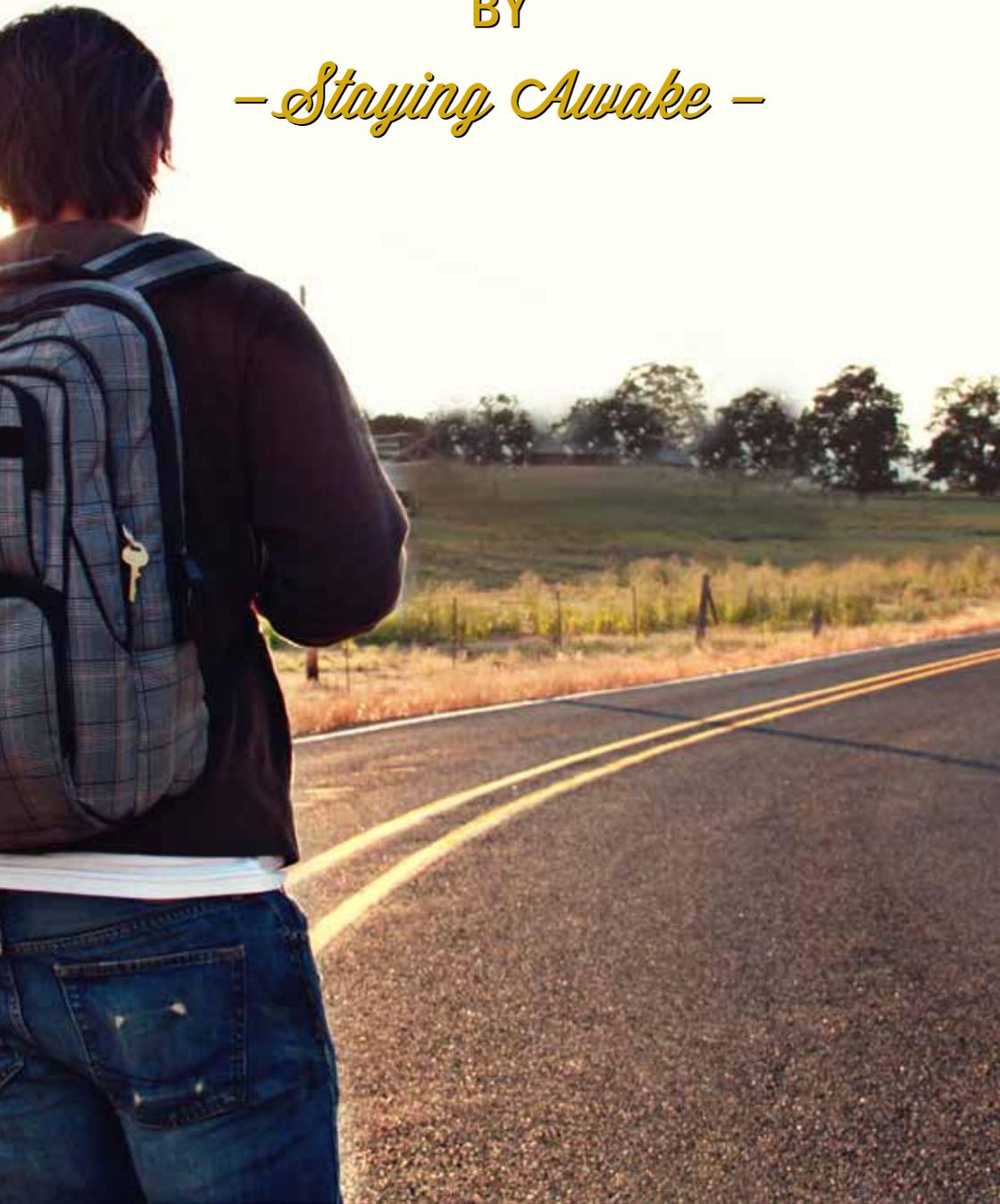
Amen.

Henri Nouwen

PREPARING THE WAY

BY

- Staying Awake -



1st Sunday of Advent

Isaiah 2:1-5

2The word that Isaiah son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem.²In days to come the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised above the hills; all the nations shall stream to it.³Many peoples shall come and say, "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths." For out of Zion shall go forth instruction, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.⁴He shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples; they shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.⁵O house of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of the Lord!

Romans 13:11-14

¹¹Besides this, you know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers;¹²the night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armour of light;¹³let us live honourably as in the day, not in revelling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarrelling and jealousy.¹⁴Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.

Matthew 24:37-44

³⁷For as the days of Noah were, so will be the coming of the Son of Man.³⁸For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark,³⁹and they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away, so too will be the coming of the Son of Man.⁴⁰Then two will be in the field; one will be taken and one will be left.⁴¹Two women will be grinding meal together; one will be taken and one will be left.⁴²Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming.⁴³But understand this: if the owner of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into.⁴⁴Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.

Reflection

Fr Paul Durkin

The ancient Roman god, Janus, the god of beginnings and gateways, was depicted as having two faces, each looking in the opposite direction, at once staring into the past, while also gazing into the future.

The season of Advent is like this: on the one hand in Advent we return in spirit to the people looking forward to the first coming of the One who would save his people. The first candle in the Advent wreath is called “the prophecy candle” because it reminds us of the prophets who foretold the coming of the Messiah.

Advent also looks into the future: to his glorious second coming and reminds us of our own dying when we will encounter the Lord, and, as we hear in the Gospel: “the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect!”

Today we hear Jesus’ words: stay alert, stay awake, be prepared, be ready! These words suggest we are not alert, not awake, not prepared or ready. At best, we are on the way. We hear anew the call of St Paul: “You know the time has come: you must wake now; our salvation is even nearer.....”

In the Gospel (*Matthew 24:37- 44*), Jesus speaks of Noah and the flood, of men and women going about their daily occupations and preoccupations and of the parable of the burglar. These three images remind us of the urgency of making a decisive response to the coming of the Son of Man.

While there is a sense of urgency here, Jesus’ words are not meant to fill us with fear and dread, but with expectation, even wonder and joy.

The image of the Lord coming in the night suggests the need for us to be constantly watchful. At every moment, for each person and for the Church, there is the danger of not hearing the One who comes - the One who knocks in order that we might be awakened, that we might become alert, that we might hear the call of the Spirit, that we might receive the Christ.

With the psalmist we pray, ‘For you, O God, I wait, all the day long’.

The Good News is that the Lord is eager to meet us and to be our Saviour. The special grace of Advent is to prepare our world, each nation, each city, each home and each heart, for the One who is always coming to us to heal us and to make this world a sanctuary in which God’s loving will is done.

We may wish to pray this Advent prayer written by Fr Karl Rahner, SJ:

“O God who is to come, grant me the grace to live now, in the hour of your Advent, in such a way that I may merit to live in you forever, in the blissful hour of your eternity.”

Let us carry the prayer of the early Church in our hearts, a prayer suited to Advent:
Maranatha, Come Lord Jesus!

Reflection questions:

1. As Advent begins, how can I become more spiritually ‘awake’ during this season?
What do I need to be more attentive to?
2. Do I feel a sense of urgency in the call of Jesus? Why or why not?



PREPARING THE WAY

BY

-turning back to God-

2nd Sunday of Advent

Isaiah 11:1-10

*1*A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots. *2*The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord. *3*His delight shall be in the fear of the Lord. He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide by what his ears hear; *4*but with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth; he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked. *5*Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist, and faithfulness the belt around his loins. *6*The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them. *7*The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. *8*The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den. *9*They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.

*10*On that day the root of Jesse shall stand as a signal to the peoples; the nations shall inquire of him, and his dwelling shall be glorious.

Romans 15:4-9

*4*For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, so that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope.

*5*May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in harmony with one another, in accordance with Christ Jesus, *6*so that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

*7*Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God. *8*For I tell you that Christ has become a servant of the circumcised on behalf of the truth of God in order that he might confirm the promises given to the patriarchs, *9*and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy. As it is written, "Therefore I will confess you among the Gentiles, and sing praises to your name".

Matthew 3:1-12

*3*In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming,²“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.”³This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said, “The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.’”⁴Now John wore clothing of camel’s hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey.⁵Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan,⁶and they were baptised by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

⁷But when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?⁸Bear fruit worthy of repentance.⁹Do not presume to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our ancestor’; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham.¹⁰Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.¹¹“I baptise you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and fire.¹²His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”

Reflection

David Patterson

Like others in this digital age, I rarely receive Christmas cards in the mail nowadays. However, I received one last year from a very good friend of mine. As I opened the envelope, I was greeted by a traditional scene of Jesus and the Holy Family in Bethlehem ... peaceful, but innocuous. There is a saying, “You cannot judge a book by its cover.” I have found the same applies to Christmas card covers. Opening the card, I found the following greeting: “May the peace of Christ disturb you!” That’s not the greeting I expected! Something warm and fuzzy, maybe, but not this. I think the point of the greeting was to stir my heart into action; to see the Scriptures as not something exclusively to comfort and pacify, but rather a challenging text full of provocation to stir the spirit to act in its accord. Today’s readings reminded me of this message.

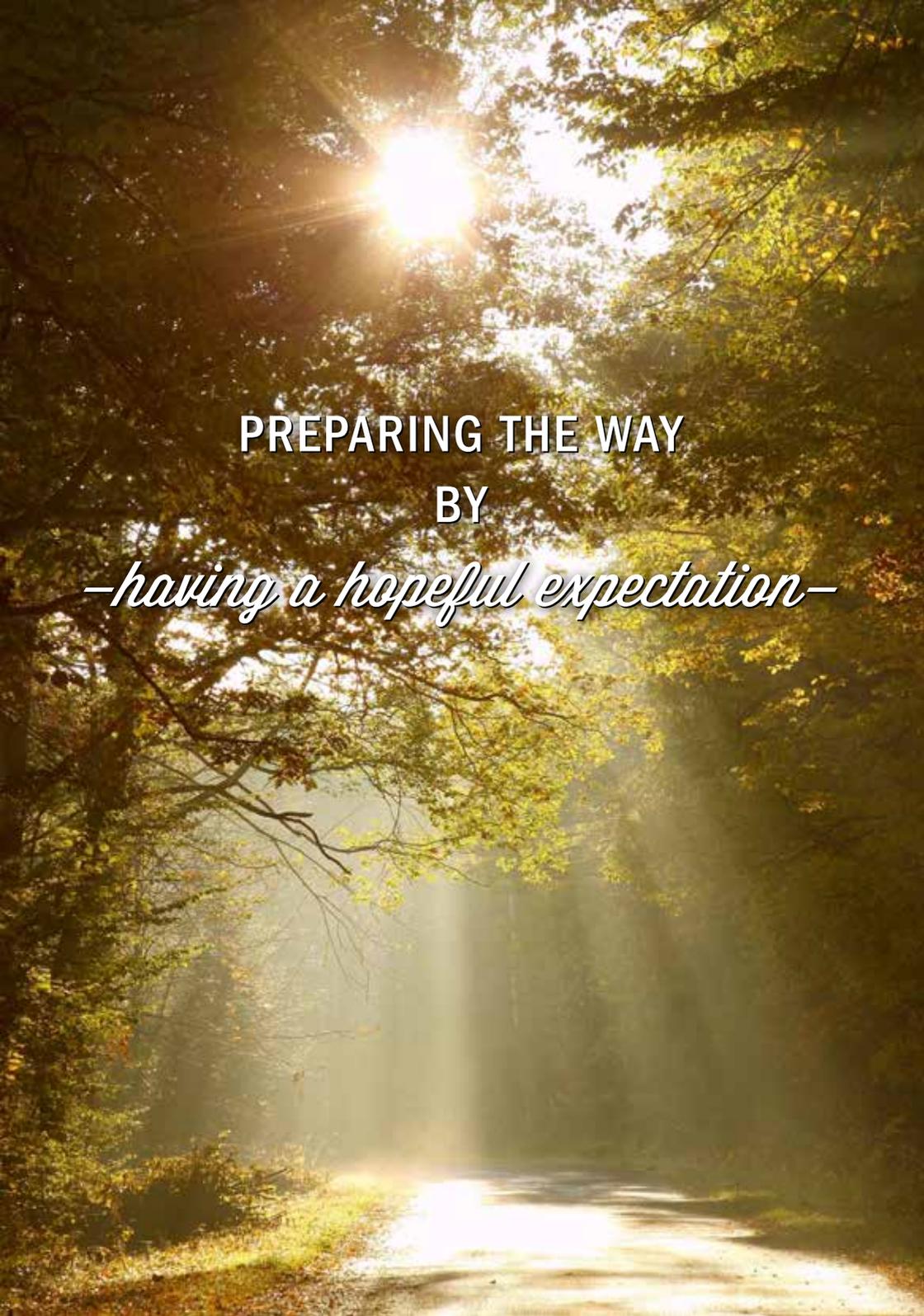
In today's Gospel, Matthew recounts the work of St John the Baptiser in the wilderness of Judea. By way of dress and eating habits, John is figured as Elijah, the one promised to precede the coming of the Christ (cf. 2 Kgs 1:8; Mal 4:5). He preaches repentance as part of our preparing "the way of the Lord." In the original Greek, the word is *metanoia*. Sometimes this is loosely translated as "change of heart," but it's more literally translated as "change of mind." In reality, it embraces both. A related term in Hebrew is *teshuvah*, which is best understood as turning back (*shuv*) to God. It is used in the Old Testament almost 1,000 times. Repentance goes beyond an understanding of error or simply being sorry for our transgressions; it embraces a heartfelt response to actively turn to God in right relationship. It is not about the false religiosity and self-righteous expressions of the Pharisees and Sadducees.

In our first reading, Isaiah voices the hopes of the people who confidently (literally, *with faith*) await the coming of the messiah, the righteousness of the Lord, and the restoration of the unity of creation as it was originally in the garden. Likewise, St Paul relates in the second reading that when we put aside differences and welcome each other in the manner of Christ, we sustain each other and live in the harmony of the Lord. Although waiting is not something we ordinarily look forward to, Advent is characterised by a joyful and hope-filled anticipation of harmony and renewal of life. The person for whom we wait never disappoints!

In the busyness of life, our hearts are often troubled, pulled in all sorts of directions. In our time of waiting, anticipation and hope this Advent, may we straighten the paths to our own hearts so that the peace, justice and integrity of Christ will bring us newness of life.

Reflection questions:

1. In what ways does the message of Christ comfort you? How might it disturb you?
2. Advent calls us to a change of heart and mind. Are there areas in my life that I need to turn around so that they face towards God?

A photograph of a dirt path winding through a dense forest. The sun is shining brightly from the upper left, creating a lens flare and casting long, dappled shadows on the path. The trees are lush with green and yellowing leaves, suggesting an autumn setting. The overall atmosphere is peaceful and hopeful.

PREPARING THE WAY

BY

—having a hopeful expectation—

3rd Sunday of Advent

Isaiah 35:1-6, 10

³The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom; like the crocus² it shall blossom abundantly, and rejoice with joy and singing. The glory of Lebanon shall be given to it, the majesty of Carmel and Sharon. They shall see the glory of the Lord, the majesty of our God.³Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees.⁴Say to those who are of a fearful heart, “Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God. He will come with vengeance, with terrible recompense. He will come and save you.”

⁵Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped;⁶then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy. For waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert.⁰And the ransomed of the Lord shall return, and come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.

James 5:7-10

⁷Be patient, therefore, beloved, until the coming of the Lord. The farmer waits for the precious crop from the earth, being patient with it until it receives the early and the late rains.⁸You also must be patient. Strengthen your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is near.⁹Beloved, do not grumble against one another, so that you may not be judged. See, the Judge is standing at the doors!¹⁰As an example of suffering and patience, beloved, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord.

Matthew 11:2-11

²When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples³ and said to him, “Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?”⁴Jesus answered them, “Go and tell John what you hear and see:⁵the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them.⁶And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me.”

⁷As they went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds about John: “What did you go out into the wilderness to look at? A reed shaken by the wind?⁸What then did you go out to see? Someone dressed in soft robes? Look, those who wear soft robes are in royal palaces.⁹What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet.¹⁰This is the one

about whom it is written, 'See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.'¹¹ Truly I tell you, among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist; yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.

Reflection

Pina Bernard

In Jesus' time, many Jewish people lived with the expectation that, in the future, a messiah would come who would liberate Israel and inaugurate the messianic age. Israel, being a tiny country, had been for much of its history ruled by a foreign power: the Assyrians, the Babylonians, the Persians, the Greeks and now the Romans. The Messiah was presumed to be a great military leader who would defeat the ruling nation and show definitively that Israel, and Israel's God, was the guiding light for all nations. The vision of the messianic age drew from the Book of the prophet Isaiah and included healing and wholeness for the blind, the deaf, the lame and the mute.

Jesus was a different messiah, an unexpected one. He wasn't rallying the troops, he wasn't preparing his battle plan. Maybe even John the Baptist had to ask whether he really was the one. But Jesus shows that the signs were already there for those who could see them. The blind were indeed seeing, and the lame walking. The Kingdom of God was already being realised among them.

John the Baptist features prominently in our Advent readings as the precursor to Jesus. The path to John was well-trod. Matthew's Gospel tells us that "the people of Jerusalem and all Judea' including 'many Pharisees and Sadducees' were coming to him to be baptized". Jesus asks the people three times, "What did you go out to see?" What did they expect to see when they went into the wilderness to meet John? Actually, he rightly did resemble a prophet, coming out of the wilderness dressed in camel skin (not soft robes) and unmistakably portrayed in the text in a similar way to the prophet Elijah from many generations previously. Yes, he was a prophet, as Jesus said. But Jesus didn't fit the expectation of a Messiah. He came differently, and not everyone could see it.

As we prepare to meet Christ at Christmas, what do we hope to see? The second reading tells us that "the coming of the Lord is at hand". So we can be confident in our

expectation. Ultimately, we should expect an encounter of sorts, a deeper realisation of Jesus-with-us.

A recent conversation with a teenager surprised me: “Christmas is superficial, just marketing and shopping. I don’t see the magic in it.” She wasn’t expecting very much from this year’s Christmas celebration. It is easy to get drained of any hopefulness of a renewed encounter with our God. As Pope Francis might say, let’s not be robbed of our joyful expectation!

In a 2007 social experiment by the Washington Post, the renowned violinist Joshua Bell began busking incognito at a Metro subway. Commuters heard the music, but most simply went on their way. Some offered a donation. Very few took any notice of this remarkable talent – they weren’t expecting it. This could be what Christmas becomes if we let it - we simply walk past an opportunity to connect more deeply with the phenomenal event of the incarnation of our God.

Often what we are truly seeking is right under our noses, and can surprise us right in the middle of the ‘superficial.’ Any encounter with another in love in some way brings Christ into our world and our lives a little more. Being sensitive to and appreciating the small interactions of love in all our relationships is a start.

And our hope is still founded even when things are tough. John the Baptist in this week’s Gospel is in a dire predicament. Things are not going well, yet he is searching and asking for Christ.

Thomas Merton states:

What is uncertain is not the “coming” of Christ but our own reception of Him, our own response to Him, our own readiness and capacity to “go forth to meet Him.” We must be willing to see Him and acclaim Him, as John did, even at the very moment when our whole life’s work and all its meaning seem to collapse.

Even, and especially, in difficult times, we should look for him. What we forget, though, is that the answer is not always immediate and often we have to wait, as Advent reminds us. God doesn’t conform to my timetable, and most of the time it is only in hindsight that we can see the movement of the Spirit.

Sometimes God’s response to our prayer and seeking is not what we expect. It surprises us and comes in new ways. Sometimes when we expect God to be gentle, he comes to challenge us instead. At times when we expect to be chastised, he surprises us with softness and compassion. This unexpected voice of God is what we should expect.

This Christmas, we pray for the ability to live in joyful expectation, and for an openness to God’s newness and surprise.

Reflection questions:

1. Do you expect this Christmas to be different to any other? Are you open to the newness that it might bring?
2. Has there been a time in which you have been surprised by an answer to a prayer you did not expect?

PREPARING THE WAY
BY
-resting in the Lord -



4th Sunday of Advent

Isaiah 7:10-14

¹⁰Again the Lord spoke to Ahaz, saying, ¹¹Ask a sign of the Lord your God; let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven. ¹²But Ahaz said, I will not ask, and I will not put the Lord to the test. ¹³Then Isaiah said: “Hear then, O house of David! Is it too little for you to weary mortals, that you weary my God also? ¹⁴Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel.”

Romans 1:1-7

1 Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God, ²which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy scriptures, ³the gospel concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh⁴ and was declared to be Son of God with power according to the spirit of holiness by resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord, ⁵through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith among all the Gentiles for the sake of his name, ⁶including yourselves who are called to belong to Jesus Christ, ⁷To all God's beloved in Rome, who are called to be saints: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Matthew 1:18-24

¹⁸ Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. ¹⁹ Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. ²⁰ But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, ‘Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.’ ²¹ She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins. ²² All this took place to fulfil what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:

²³ ‘Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel’, which means, ‘God is with us.’ ²⁴ When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, ²⁵ but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.

Reflection

Gail Gill

A variety of images of the Christmas story surround us at this time of the year. Matthew and Luke's accounts of the birth of Jesus are usually merged and if Joseph is included he is commonly portrayed as an ageing figure standing somewhat apart and observing Mary and Jesus. In Matthew's account of how Jesus came to be born, Joseph is far from being an onlooker. The scriptures do not tell us much about Joseph. He may have been older than Mary, although some think that portraying Joseph as old was simply a way of illustrating his chaste relationship with Mary.

We know that Joseph was a 'man of honour'; other translations offer the richer description of Joseph being a righteous man. In other words, Joseph lived in right relationship with God and with his Jewish community and did what is just and right in all of his relationships. For Joseph to discover that Mary was pregnant while they were betrothed presented Joseph with a painful choice. He knew the law and that he had only two choices. The strictest punishment for adultery was death by stoning for Mary and her unborn child. Matthew tells us that Joseph had rejected this option. He had decided on the less violent option of privately divorcing Mary, which even so, would have meant a life of great hardship for Mary and her child. We can perhaps imagine the distress and confusion of both Joseph and Mary.

Pope Francis describes Joseph as 'resting in the Lord' where he is open to hearing and accepting what God is asking him to do. Following God's message to him in a dream, Joseph courageously discards his plans to quietly divorce Mary, takes her as his wife and provides protection and shelter for Mary and Jesus. Matthew does not give us any details about Joseph's reaction to God's revelation, only that when Joseph awoke he did what God had asked. Joseph's openness to God has released him from the restriction of fear and blessed him with assurance, compassion and the courage to not be afraid to change his plans, and to embark on a life journey with Mary and Jesus with the confidence that God is indeed with them.

Matthew's Joseph is not the elderly onlooker so often imaged in nativity artwork. Perhaps El Greco's strong young Joseph with Jesus trustingly hanging on to him is closer to the Joseph who could humbly move beyond legalism to true compassion

The reading from Isaiah is about King Ahaz of Judah who cannot see beyond his own treacherous plans for power and who refuses to trust in God. Perhaps fear has paralysed him and he is incapable of hearing the message of God that



the prophet announces. Isaiah urges Ahaz to trust in God's promises rather than forming political alliances. Ahaz ignores the prophet and eventually goes on to form a diabolical alliance with Assyria, the 'superpower' of the time, with tragic consequences for the kingdom of Judah.

In this introductory section of Paul's letter to the community in Rome, Paul introduces himself as being called and sent to proclaim the good news of the Son of God, Jesus Christ risen from the dead. We can include ourselves with those whom Paul calls to holiness through a deep listening to God that is expressed through lives of missionary discipleship.

In this last week before we celebrate the birth of Jesus, the pace of planning and preparation for all kinds of things has probably accelerated. For some, it will be completing preparations for work next year, for others the busyness of preparing for holidays, visiting relatives and preparation for Christmas lunch or dinner. Everything is hectic; end of year functions, some we want to attend and others that we're obliged to attend. Frantic shopping for food and gifts, the incessant sound of carols in shopping centres, the congestion of traffic and lack of parking everywhere. We are surrounded by noise and extravagance that seems so far removed from celebrating the coming of God among us in Jesus.

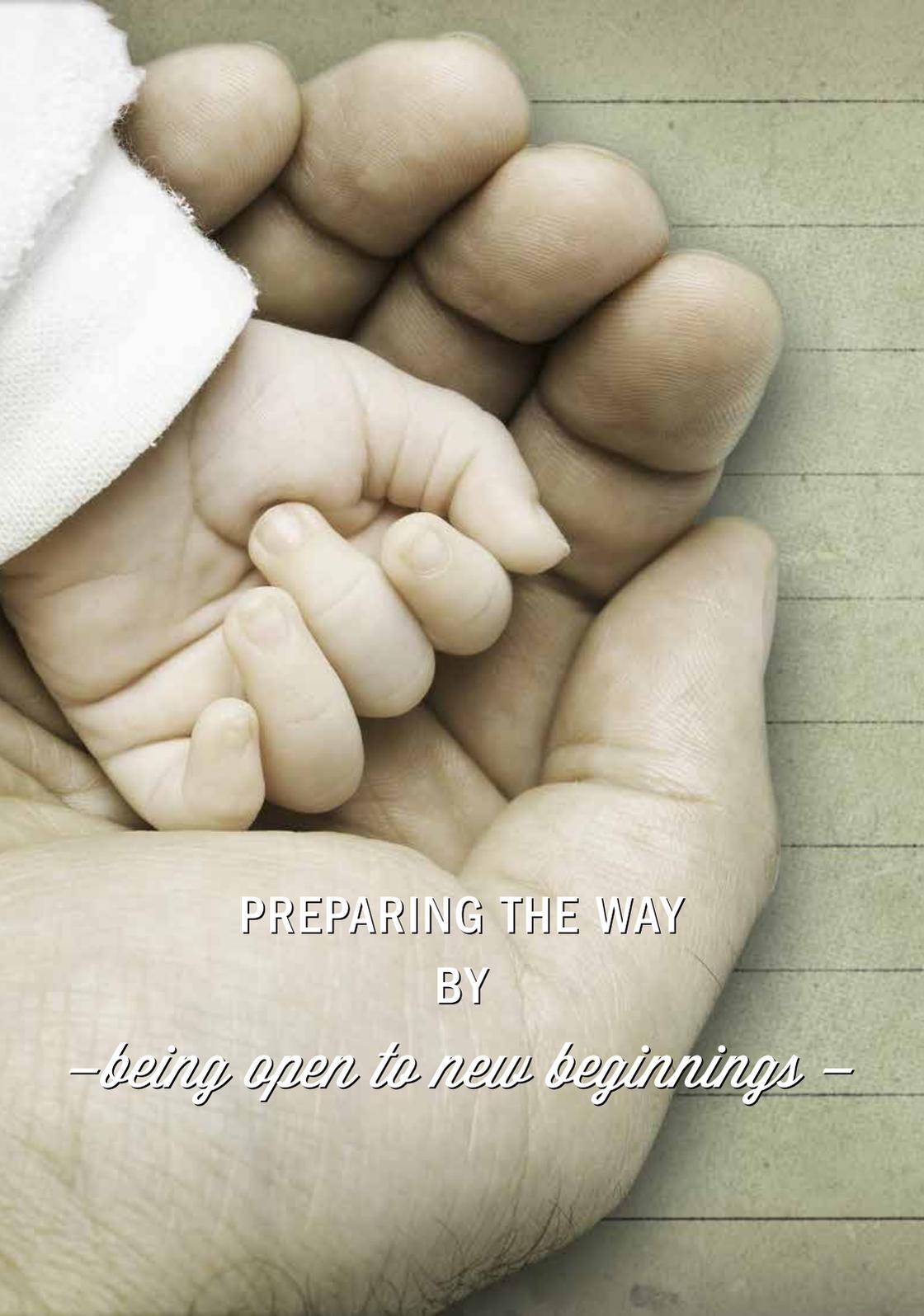
Despite the peaceful nativity scenes, at the time of Jesus' birth Bethlehem would have been a frightening place of Roman occupation. The confusion and distress of Mary and Joseph, the dangerous times they lived in, are all part of how God chose to come to us in Jesus. The grace and joy of Christmas is surely that God is with us in shared humanity and in the chaos that can mean in family relationships and in the loneliness of broken relationships. In the midst of all this we can follow Joseph's example by seeking out even a few quiet moments to notice God with us in all that we experience. The Irish poet, Patrick Kavanagh describes this as:

God is in the bits and pieces of Everyday –
A kiss here and a laugh again, and sometimes tears,
A pearl necklace around the neck of poverty.¹

Reflection questions:

- **Where in your life do you need to be open to letting go of plans that you are clinging to?**
- **As you go about your preparations for Christmas, notice your experiences of God with us. Share these with someone close to you and pray with thanks.**

¹*The Great Hunger*



PREPARING THE WAY

BY

-being open to new beginnings -

Christmas – Midnight Mass Readings

Isaiah 9:1-7

*9*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.

*2*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.

*3*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.

*4*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.

*5*For all the boots of the tramping warriors
and all the garments rolled in blood
shall be burned as fuel for the fire.

*6*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.

*7*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

¹¹For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all, ¹²training us to renounce impiety and worldly passions, and in the present age to live lives that are self-controlled, upright, and godly, ¹³while we wait for the blessed hope and the manifestation of the glory of our great God and Saviour, Jesus Christ. ¹⁴He 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

²In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. ³This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. ⁴All went to their own towns to be registered. ⁵Joseph 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. ⁶He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. ⁷While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. ⁸And 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.

⁹In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. ¹⁰Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. ¹¹But the angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: ¹²to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord. ¹³This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.' ¹⁴And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,

¹⁵'Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace among those whom he favours!'

Reflection

Rev Dr David Ranson VG

There is a magic in every beginning, wrote the German philosopher Herman Hesse.² How true this is when we experience the birth of our children, when we hold a newborn baby in our arms, when we delight in the pure wonder and sense of play evidence in young children, and as we observe our children growing so quickly. When we gaze upon a child we are caught intensely between an immediate experience of the present and a heightened expectation of the future, between a “fulfilled moment and the beginning of a new day.”³

As another German writer, Jürgen Moltmann, so beautifully expresses it,

Childhood and youth are . . . transfigured with the daybreak colours of the dawn of life . . . imagined childlike innocence, this image of the pure beginning, this world of unlimited possibilities – all this makes childhood the image of hope . . . and when we search for ‘the child in us’ it is because we long to open this wellspring in ourselves once more.⁴

The recovery of the ‘child in us’ is indeed a task that is always set before us. It is the challenge for us even in our old age when we might “blow away the chaff of many things, so as to reveal the essential wheat of our time on earth,” according to Daniel O’Leary.⁵ He goes on to observe,

Our souls are always young. They have preserved, in a safe place, the fields of dreams that once lay beautifully across the landscapes of our childhood. It is in these fields, and in no other, where the seeds of our God-like beauty were first nurtured, that our eternal harvest will be reaped. We do not outgrow our childhood. We grow into it more fully as we grow older. And it is only in heaven that we will possess it completely.⁶

Is it surprising, then, that for Jesus the child is the image of the gospel’s invitation? Every child “represents a new beginning of life . . . original, completely incomparable” and every birth “strengthens and confirms the great hope for the victory of life” that each of us cherish deep within us even in the midst of the distortions of our life journeys, our failures, our cynicism and frustration.⁷

²Herman Hesse, cited in Jürgen Moltmann, *In the End – The Beginning: The life of hope*, translated by Margaret Kohl, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004), 3. I am indebted to Moltmann for the theme of this homily.

³Moltmann, *In the End – The Beginning*, 8.

⁴Moltmann, *In the End – The Beginning*, 10.

⁵Daniel O’Leary, “Home Before Dark,” *The Tablet* (28 June 2008), 11.

⁶O’Leary, “Home Before Dark,” 11.

⁷See Moltmann, *In the End – The Beginning*, 16-17.

In every child God waits for us to stir again within us the sense of new beginnings, of fresh possibilities, of awakening hopes. The divine invitation set before us is forever to become like a child so that, no matter our circumstances, life might be born again and begin afresh.⁸ Emerson once observed that each child, then, is the eternal messiah who returns again and again among fallen men and women, in order to lead us into the kingdom of heaven.⁹

Every child is the sign of life's hope of ever new beginnings.

On this most holy day we dare to proclaim that God has become a child. We celebrate that God has not only emptied himself of divinity to become one of us so as to share our humanity but that God has become a child. Childhood remains in God eternally. For God is an eternal beginning, an infinite possibility, an unquenchable awakening, pure presence. And if this be so, then, as we gaze upon the Divine Child at Bethlehem, we can let go of life's dead ends. We can see beyond the apparent blockages created by our failures and mistakes. We can glimpse beyond the stifling messages that we have received about ourselves. We can break open the tomb of our hurts and our bitterness. We can break open the numbness created by our fear of imagination. We can breathe again, weep again, laugh again, love again. The child within us, ever open to the dawning fullness of life, can be born again and stretch out into the future once more.

Many, many centuries ago, the Church father, Irenaeus wrote that the Christian life is a beginning, moving through beginnings, to a beginning. This possibility can never be taken away from us no matter the darkness of our night. Christmas reminds us of this again and again.

In this gift there is magic indeed.

Reflection questions:

1. In what ways might you sense childhood still present within yourself?
2. "God is an eternal beginning" How do I understand this statement, and how is this evident in my life and in the world?

⁸See Moltmann, *In the End – The Beginning*, 14.

⁹Cited in Moltmann, *In the End – The Beginning*, 15.

Christmas Prayer

The Word of God
in the beginning
and before all time;
today he is born to us,
the Saviour of the world.

Lord Jesus, your birth is our peace.

We join the shepherds in adoring you,
we kneel before you, holy child of Bethlehem.

Lord Jesus, your birth is our peace.

May our lives express what we celebrate at Christmas,
may its mystery enrich your people.

Lord Jesus, your birth is our peace.

As we travel on this earthly pilgrimage,
may your light shine in our hearts
and may we see your glory,
born in our midst.

Lord Jesus, your birth is our peace.



PREPARING THE WAY

BY

— following the light of Jesus —

Epiphany

Isaiah 60:1-9

60 Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.² For darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the Lord will arise upon you, and his glory will appear over you.³ Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn.⁴ Lift up your eyes and look around; they all gather together, they come to you; your sons shall come from far away, and your daughters shall be carried on their nurses' arms.⁵ Then you shall see and be radiant; your heart shall thrill and rejoice, because the abundance of the sea shall be brought to you, the wealth of the nations shall come to you.⁶ A multitude of camels shall cover you, the young camels of Midian and Ephah; all those from Sheba shall come. They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall proclaim the praise of the Lord.⁷ All the flocks of Kedar shall be gathered to you, the rams of Nebaioth shall minister to you; they shall be acceptable on my altar, and I will glorify my glorious house.⁸ Who are these that fly like a cloud, and like doves to their windows?

⁹ For the coastlands shall wait for me, the ships of Tarshish first, to bring your children from far away, their silver and gold with them, for the name of the Lord your God, and for the Holy One of Israel, because he has glorified you.

Ephesians 3:1-12

3 This is the reason that I Paul am a prisoner for Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles – ² for surely you have already heard of the commission of God's grace that was given me for you,³ and how the mystery was made known to me by revelation, as I wrote above in a few words,⁴ a reading of which will enable you to perceive my understanding of the mystery of Christ.⁵ In former generations this mystery was not made known to humankind, as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit:⁶ that is, the Gentiles have become fellow heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.⁷ Of this gospel I have become a servant according to the gift of God's grace that was given me by the working of his power.⁸ Although I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given to me to bring to the Gentiles the news of the boundless riches of Christ,⁹ and to make everyone see what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things;¹⁰ so that through the church the wisdom of God in its rich variety might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places.¹¹ This was in accordance with the eternal purpose that he has carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord,¹² in whom we have access to God in boldness and confidence through faith in him.

Matthew 2:1-12

*2*In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem,²asking, “Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.”³When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him;⁴and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born.⁵They told him, “In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:⁶‘And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.’”⁷Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared.⁸Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, “Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.”

⁹When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was.¹⁰When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy.¹¹On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.¹²And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

Reflection

Deacon David McKenzie

Today we celebrate the Solemnity of the Epiphany of the Lord. An epiphany is defined as “*an experience of a sudden and striking realisation.*”

In our Gospel the Wise Men, the Magi from Babylon, followed the light of a bright star to Jerusalem. They came in search of a child who, according to the prophecy Daniel had taught their ancestors two hundred years before, was “*the infant king of the Jews.*” The light of the star guided them to where Jesus lay, cared for by his mother Mary, and guarded by her husband Joseph.

As they found the child and presented him with their gifts of gold and frankincense and myrrh, the miracle of the Epiphany occurred. Standing in the presence of the infant Jesus, the Magi had an epiphany. They experienced a sudden and striking realisation that this child was not just the infant king of a human tribe, this was the Son of the living God and “*falling to their knees they did him homage.*”

We are on a journey, you and I, a journey we call life. On our journey we follow the Way, Jesus the Way, the Truth and the Life. We are guided on this journey by the Light of Christ which we received at our Baptism. Jesus is the Light of the World. Jesus is our Light, lighting the path we are to follow.

In our first reading from 3rd Isaiah, the Israelites, who had returned to Jerusalem from captivity in Babylon, were encouraged by the prophet Isaiah who tells them, “*Above you the Lord now rises, and above you his glory appears. The nations come to your light and kings to your dawning brightness.*” Their life journey had led them back to Jerusalem which was a shell of its former glory, its walls were torn down, the Temple destroyed and its population decimated. The prophet tells them not to despair, to get on with the task of rebuilding Jerusalem, because the Lord was with them, shone on them and on Jerusalem. Isaiah prophesied that through them, through Jerusalem, the nations of the world would come to Jerusalem to give praise and glory to God.

On this the Feast of the Epiphany of the Lord, our epiphany may be the realisation that from the dawn of time, God has been lighting our journey too. As God lit the life journey of the Israelites and as God provided the Magi with the bright light of a shining star to find “*the infant king of the Jews*”, so God guides us to find Jesus, the Son of God.

We realise that, as St Paul wrote to the Ephesians in today's second reading, we are parts of the body of Christ and share in the inheritance of Christ. We realise that we are to follow Jesus the Christ by living as he lived, for others. We are to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, care for the sick and the elderly, visit the lonely and those in prison, speak up for the voiceless. In doing this, living for others, we are blessed, happy, holy. We realise that if we follow Jesus, by loving God and loving each other, at the end of our life's journey, we too will come to the New Jerusalem to give praise and glory to God.

Reflection questions:

1. How have you experienced the guiding light of Christ in your life?
2. The Epiphany reminds us that the light of Christ is for all people. How might I bring this light to those around me?



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