

lectio divina

PRAYING THE SCRIPTURES IN ADVENT Year B, 2017

A close-up photograph of a newborn baby wrapped in a white towel with a brown border. The baby is looking towards the camera with a calm expression. The background is softly blurred, showing a person's arm holding the baby.

GOD WITH US

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Introduction - "God with us"

The words "incarnate of the Virgin Mary, and became man" will be very familiar to you. So familiar perhaps from praying of the Nicene Creed that we may not always notice that they speak to a profound mystery. Our unseen God, the Word, in the greatest act of humility became incarnate, or enfleshed, in Jesus his beloved Son. He took on our humanity and linked himself with humankind in a way that was truly new, intimate and eternal.



During Advent we look forward to celebrating not only the arrival of the Child Jesus, but the fact that God chose to share our limited physical form, entering into our world in such a tangible and humble way. This is why Pope Francis calls Christmas "the feast of the *loving humility of God*, of the God who upsets our logical expectations, the established order" (Pope Francis, 22 December, 2016). Rather than arriving to dominate, God becomes fragile like us, and unites himself to us in order to communicate his very life and joy.

In the Incarnation Jesus reconciles us with God, allowing what keeps us from God to be removed. This is the action of a God who doesn't leave us in our own mess, but takes drastic measures to enter in to it, and bring us to salvation.

By becoming human Jesus shows us God's love in person, not just through an idea. The miracles of healing, as well as the stories he told, speak of a personal love for each one of us. His death and resurrection became the ultimate gift of love and mercy to us all.

Jesus became a model of holiness for us. As disciples, we learn from him what it means to love. When we learn from Jesus how to love, we too share in the life of God, who is love. Thus by taking on human nature, Jesus allows us also to partake in the divine nature. Jesus' entry into our world can be seen as a new creation in which God's plan for humanity is fully revealed.

This is the wonder that we contemplate leading into Christmas: the Incarnation is not just an historical event. God continues to arrive into our lives in new ways each and every day. He is with us in our present, and with us into our future. As we journey through these weeks of Advent, let us rediscover this beautiful mystery and be open to the merciful and loving God who arrives in unexpected ways.

Bishop Peter A Comensoli
Diocese of Broken Bay

How to Pray Lectio Divina

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

1 Reading

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.

Sharing: If part of a group, you may wish to share your initial insights into the text.

2 Meditation

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?

Sharing: If part of a group, you may wish to share something of your deeper reflections.

3 Prayer

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)

4 Action

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)

Sharing: If part of a group, you may wish to share the text chosen for daily reflection.

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.

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

*Just as time starts to gather pace towards Christmas,
Advent seeks to slow me down,
to savour this time,
to find spaces of awareness,
and moments of watchfulness.*

*Jesus,
I long for this quiet, reflective time,
to see your presence with me in a new way,
to see those around me with fresh eyes,
to see myself authentically.*

*Jesus,
you broke into our world as a child,
you are God with us.
Help me to appreciate what your coming means.*

*You gave your life for us,
you are God with us.
In my tough times, send your light.*

*Your Spirit permeates all creation,
you are God with us.*

Help me to be open to the new and unexpected ways you enter my life.

Amen.

A series of seven ancient antiphons, called the "O" Antiphons, feature in the last 7 days of Advent (Dec 17 – 24). These can be easily missed. They richly express the Church's faith in what the Messiah means to us and our great longing that he comes amongst us. They are used at Mass as verses before the Gospel, and can also become our own prayer as we wait expectantly this Advent.

*O Wisdom of our God Most High,
guiding creation with power and love:
come to teach us the path of knowledge!*

*O Leader of the House of Israel,
giver of the Law to Moses on Sinai:
come to rescue us with your mighty power!*

*O Root of Jesse's stem,
sign of God's love for all his people:
come to save us without delay!*

*O Key of David,
opening the gates of God's eternal Kingdom:
come and free the prisoners of darkness!*

*O Radiant Dawn,
splendour of eternal light, sun of justice:
come and shine on those who dwell in darkness and in
the shadow of death!*

*O King of all nations and keystone of the Church:
come and save us, whom you formed from the dust!*

*O Emmanuel, our King and Giver of Law:
come to save us, Lord our God!*

KEEP AWAKE



1st Sunday of Advent

Isaiah 63:16-17, 64:1, 3-8

63 ¹⁶For you are our father, though Abraham does not know us and Israel does not acknowledge us; you, O LORD, are our father; our Redeemer from of old is your name. ¹⁷Why, O LORD, do you make us stray from your ways and harden our heart, so that we do not fear you? Turn back for the sake of your servants, for the sake of the tribes that are your heritage.

64 O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence. ³When you did awesome deeds that we did not expect, you came down, the mountains quaked at your presence. ⁴From ages past no one has heard, no ear has perceived, no eye has seen any God besides you, who works for those who wait for him. ⁵You meet those who gladly do right, those who remember you in your ways. But you were angry, and we sinned; because you hid yourself we transgressed. ⁶We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a filthy cloth. We all fade like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away. ⁷There is no one who calls on your name, or attempts to take hold of you; for you have hidden your face from us, and have delivered us into the hand of our iniquity. ⁸Yet, O LORD, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand.

1 Corinthians 1:3-9

³Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. ⁴I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that has been given you in Christ Jesus, ⁵for in every way you have been enriched in him, in speech and knowledge of every kind – ⁶just as the testimony of Christ has been strengthened among you – ⁷so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁸He will also strengthen you to the end, so that you may be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁹God is faithful; by him you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

Mark 13:33-37

13 ³³Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come. ³⁴It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his slaves in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch. ³⁵Therefore, keep awake – for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn, ³⁶or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. ³⁷And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.”

Reflection

Pina Bernard

Last year, I decided that I wasn't going to buy into the 'busyness' of the Christmas season. I purposely slowed down my walking pace, relaxed my shoulders and breathed as I tackled the inevitable visit to the shopping centre. I felt like the character in a slow motion scene in a movie where, while everything was happening at speed around me, I was instead moving slowly, almost floating, suspended, in a state of heightened awareness and observation.

This speaks to me of Advent - a time to watch, wait, to keep awake and alert, as the Gospel for this week tells us. It's a time to pay attention - God is coming to us in a new way, so we had better get ready for when God comes.

Of course, God entered into our world in a definitive and unique way in the child Jesus; and Jesus will return at a time in the future that we don't know. But if we stay spiritually awake and pay attention, between these two momentous occasions bracketing a large expanse of time, Christ still enters in new ways all the time.

There were two Greek words for time – "chronos" and "kairos". Whilst 'chronos' speaks of our regular daily chronological time in days, hours and minutes that we know so well, 'kairos' speaks of a 'right and opportune moment' or a suitable time when something is to happen. This sort of time describes time in God very well – those moments when things happen in God's time, at God's appointed time. The birth of Christ was a kairos moment when God's time intersected with ours. Jesus' coming as one of us brings God into our human condition in an integral way. God's presence has been woven into our reality and is here to stay.

Yet, our spiritual life is made up of times when God indeed does seem close, and times when God seems far. It's the times when God seems far that challenge us. Why isn't my prayer being answered when I am suffering? This is the cry of the people in the first reading, calling for the God they know who has helped them in the past to 'tear open the heavens and come down'. They have built a relationship with God, and they still trust that God will help them as in the past. As God led them out of Egypt, God can lead them out of Babylon. And while they wait, they know that God is trustworthy and faithful.

Advent speaks of hope and confidence in our waiting. Do we trust enough to wait expectantly, or does our waiting force us to give up on God? Can we trust that God is faithful? In all situations, we mustn't confuse God's delay with God's denial. When we are on a faith journey, we always have something to hold on to, a memory of a loving God who is faithful. When God seems absent, this is when we must wait. These are the times when we show God our faithfulness and our trust in God's grace and mercy.

Advent reminds us to wake up and be attentive in our waiting for when Christ ultimately returns, but also to be awake to Christ here and now. Ultimately, we are children of the day, not of the night. We shouldn't be sleeping, but should be awake to the newness that a life in Christ brings. What does it mean for us, then, to 'stay awake'?

We wake up to the fact that God is in relationship with us and present to us;
We wake up to what we have done wrong, and face it and try to change;
We wake up to what is really important in our life and make this the priority;
We wake up to the reality of people's needs around us;
We wake up to our selfishness and focus on others instead;
We wake up to the grandeur of all of God's creation;
We go through life with eyes and ears wide open, responding authentically to the situations we find.

This Advent, let's keep our focus on Christ. Let's be awake to what he wants us to see so that when Christmas comes, we can say, yes, God has come in a new way today, and is indeed God with us every day.

Reflection questions:

1. At what speed have I started Advent this year?
2. Where are the spaces that I am going to make for God this Advent?
3. In what ways has God been faithful in my life? Can I hold onto this in tough times?
4. What area of my life am I being called to wake up to?
5. In what area of my life do I pray that God will enter in a new way?

Dear Brothers and Sisters: Today I wish to speak about that dimension of hope which we can call *attentive waiting*. Jesus tells his disciples to be like those who await the return of their master, with lamps alight (cf. *Lk* 12:35-36). As Christians, therefore, we are always attentive, awaiting the Lord's return, when God will be all in all (cf. *1 Cor* 15:28). Every day is a new opportunity to be attentive to God, to welcome the day as his gift, and to live that day by offering our good works to him. Such attentiveness requires patience, however, if we are not to lose sight of God's grace when our days are monotonous, or our difficulties many. For no night is so long, as to make us forget the joy that comes with dawn. As Christians, we know that Christ will return; that no matter what we may suffer, life has its purpose and deeper meaning, and that the merciful Lord will greet us at its end. Thus we can look upon history and our own lives with confidence and hope, knowing that the future is not guided solely by the work of our hands but by God's providence. May we repeat everyday the words of the first disciples: "Come, Lord Jesus!" (*Rev.* 22:20). And in our most difficult moments, may we hear the consoling response of Jesus: "Behold, I am coming soon" (*Rev.* 22:7).

Pope Francis, 11 October 2017

PREPARE THE WAY



2nd Sunday of Advent

Isaiah 40:1-5, 9-11

40 Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. ²Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins. ³A voice cries out: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. ⁴Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. ⁵Then the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken."

⁹Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good tidings; lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings, lift it up, do not fear; say to the cities of Judah, "Here is your God!" ¹⁰See, the Lord GOD comes with might, and his arm rules for him; his reward is with him, and his recompense before him. ¹¹He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep.

2 Peter 3:8-14

3 ⁸But do not ignore this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day. ⁹The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance. ¹⁰But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a loud noise, and the elements will be dissolved with fire, and the earth and everything that is done on it will be disclosed.

¹¹Since all these things are to be dissolved in this way, what sort of persons ought you to be in leading lives of holiness and godliness, ¹²waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be set ablaze and dissolved, and the elements will melt with fire? ¹³But, in accordance with his promise, we wait for new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home. ¹⁴Therefore, beloved, while you are waiting for these things, strive to be found by him at peace, without spot or blemish.

Mark 1:1-8

1 The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

²As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,

"See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way;

³*the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:*

‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight,’”

⁴*John the baptiser appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁵And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptised by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. ⁶Now John was clothed with camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. ⁷He proclaimed, “The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. ⁸I have baptised you with water; but he will baptise you with the Holy Spirit.”*

Reflection

David Patterson

Advent is a time of joyful anticipation. However, in the lead up to Christmas, we can find ourselves especially busy organising the tail-end of the year, shopping for gifts representing our love and connection with family and friends, and fielding generous offers to gather and celebrate with friends new and old. These rhythms are all life-giving, but they don’t necessarily help us to “prepare the way of the Lord.”

It is instructive to look at the etymology of the word prepare. From the Latin *praeparare*, it is a combination of two words: *prae* which means “before” and *parare* which may be rendered as “bring forward.” Thus, to prepare is to get ready for something which is to take place. What’s the “something” to take place? Nothing short of “The beginning of the Good News of Jesus Christ, the Son of God” (Mk 1:1). This is good news indeed if we apprehend the significance of our life in and through Jesus. It’s certainly worthy of our preparing!

Like stage direction or a Greek tragedy where the narrator comes on set and fills us in on some important detail, the Gospel according to Mark begins with this truth. We eagerly read ahead hoping that the characters can appreciate what we already know. But it’s not just written for the other in a time long ago. These are words for us, today. How do we prepare for the coming of the Good News? By preparing our hearts by way of prayer, by contemplating the face of Christ, by availing ourselves of the Sacrament of Reconciliation, by recollecting Jesus’ saving grace, and a myriad of other personal responses which bring us closer to the person of Jesus. All this suggests a little time and space.

The early Christian believed in the imminent second coming of Christ, and it is for this that we really await in joyful hope. In the busyness of life and our pursuit of ‘success,’ unless we’re prepared we find

ourselves constantly unorganised and taken by surprise. The great 20th century American monk and mystic, Thomas Merton, said that "People may spend their whole lives climbing the ladder of success only to find, once they reach the top, that the ladder is leaning against the wrong wall."

We are invited by this season to simultaneously prepare for Christ's coming and witness to his continued presence among us. This is part of the Paschal rhythm; an acknowledgment of the "already but not-yet." It's a little dangerous to speak of the Incarnation as exclusively an historical reality rooted in the past. It wasn't a quaint 30 year incursion in human history never to be visited again. The co-founder of the Catholic religious order, the Oblates of St Francis de Sales, Mother Mary de Sales Chappuis, used to say to the young seminarians, "Live your life in such a way so that people will proclaim, 'Truly, the Lord walks the earth again!'" The invitation to live the life of Christ is constantly before us, shaping us anew. This is how the kingdom is built; this is the source of the peace, joy and hope we seek in a world which so hungers.

The messenger in the first reading (Isaiah 40:1-5, 9-11) presents a joyful note of consolation that God is near, and God is coming. In our Gospel today, it is no coincidence that John the Baptist is figured, by way of dress and eating habits, as Elijah, the one promised to precede the coming of the Christ (cf. 2 Kgs 1:8; Mal 4:5). Just as Elijah had something important to say, so does John the Baptist in announcing the coming of the Christ, the promised one of old! He leads us in this Advent season to the "the beginning of the good news ... the Son of God" (1:1). That we might have ears today to listen to this invitation and come closer to the person of Jesus. This is our preparation for receiving him at Christmas.

We should not be anxious about the future with its inevitable uncertainty and busyness. Advent allows the time to "make straight our paths" to the living God manifested in the person of Jesus. It is in the joyful anticipation of his coming, in our "preparing the way," that ensures our ladder is against the right wall, firmly planted for us to be, like John the Baptist, a guide for others to follow.

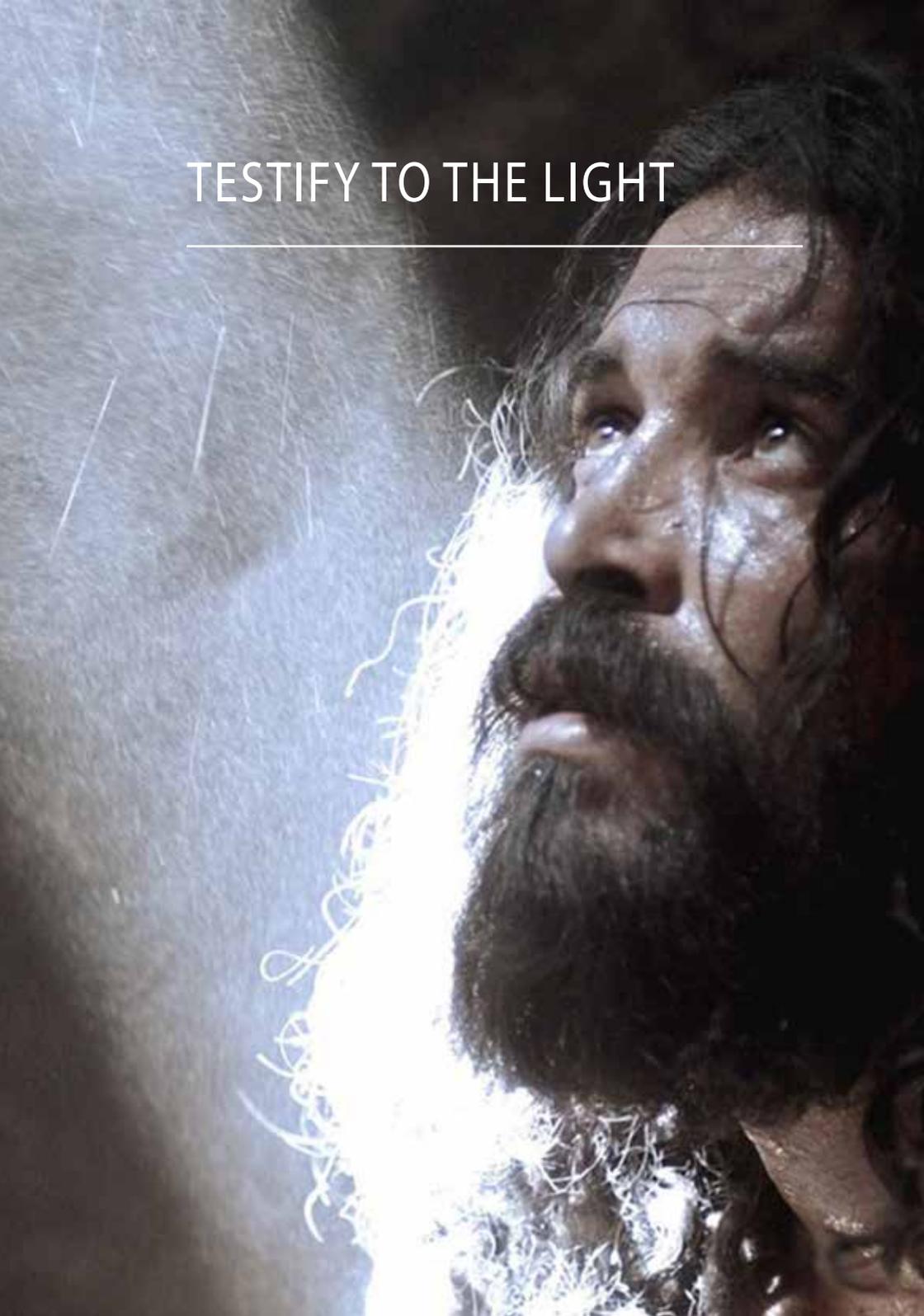
Reflection questions:

1. How can you best use these weeks of preparation to be spiritually ready for Christmas?
2. What does “being prepared” mean to you? How ready are you right now? What are some of the indicators of this “readiness”?
3. While Christmas can be a busy time for many, it is also a time of dislocation, isolation and loneliness for others. How might “preparing the way” this Advent encompass receiving Christ in the guise of the poor and marginalised?
4. This Advent, for what are you yearning or longing?
5. In what ways are you called to be a prophet of the message of John the Baptist?

Isaiah addresses people who have passed through a dark period, who have been subjected to a very difficult trial; but now the time of comfort has come. Sorrow and fear can be replaced with joy, for the Lord himself will guide his people on the way to liberation and salvation. How will He do all this? With the solicitude and tenderness of a shepherd who takes care of his flock. He will in fact provide unity and security and feed his flock, gather the lost sheep into his sure fold, reserve special attention to the most fragile and weak (v.11). This is God’s attitude toward us, his creatures. For this reason, the Prophet invites those who hear him – including us, today – to spread this message of hope: that the Lord consoles us. And to make room for the comfort which comes from the Lord.

Pope Francis, 7 December 2014

TESTIFY TO THE LIGHT



3rd Sunday of Advent

Isaiah 61:1-2, 10-11

61 The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; ²to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn.

¹⁰I will greatly rejoice in the LORD, my whole being shall exult in my God; for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation, he has covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels. ¹¹For as the earth brings forth its shoots, and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up, so the Lord GOD will cause righteousness and praise to spring up before all the nations.

1 Thessalonians 5:12-28

5 ¹²But we appeal to you, brothers and sisters, to respect those who labour among you, and have charge of you in the Lord and admonish you; ¹³esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Be at peace among yourselves. ¹⁴And we urge you, beloved, to admonish the idlers, encourage the faint hearted, help the weak, be patient with all of them. ¹⁵See that none of you repays evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to all.

¹⁶Rejoice always, ¹⁷pray without ceasing, ¹⁸give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. ¹⁹Do not quench the Spirit. ²⁰Do not despise the words of prophets, ²¹but test everything; hold fast to what is good; ²²abstain from every form of evil.

²³May the God of peace himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. ²⁴The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do this. ²⁵Beloved, pray for us. ²⁶Greet all the brothers and sisters with a holy kiss. ²⁷I solemnly command you by the Lord that this letter be read to all of them. ²⁸The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.

John 1:6-8, 19-28

1 ⁶There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. ⁷He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. ⁸He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light.

¹⁹This is the testimony given by John when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask

him, "Who are you?" ²⁰He confessed and did not deny it, but confessed, "I am not the Messiah." ²¹And they asked him, "What then? Are you Elijah?" He said, "I am not." "Are you the prophet?" He answered, "No." ²²Then they said to him, "Who are you? Let us have an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?" ²³He said, "I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord,'" as the prophet Isaiah said. ²⁴Now they had been sent from the Pharisees. ²⁵They asked him, "Why then are you baptizing if you are neither the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?" ²⁶John answered them, "I baptise with water. Among you stands one whom you do not know, ²⁷the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal." ²⁸This took place in Bethany across the Jordan where John was baptizing.

Reflection

Deacon Adrian Gomez

If someone asks "Who are you?" how would you answer? Your name? What you do? Who you are related to? A group you belong to? What right you have to be there? How you answer this question might depend on who is asking the question and the context in which you find yourself. But in reflecting on our own deepest identity this is also a question we can ask of ourselves.

When the priests and Levites asked "Who are you?" to John, he answered who he was not. "I am not the Messiah." He is not Elijah, he is not the Prophet, he is not the light. In the Fourth Gospel, unlike the Synoptics, John is not called "John the Baptist" or "John the Baptiser".

So who is he? "The voice of one crying out in the wilderness." John knows who he is and who he is not. He claims neither too much nor too little. This Gospel presents us with the testimony of "John the Witness." He is a voice, a witness who is given credibility by his self-knowledge. The opening verses make John's identity and mission very clear:

1. God sent a man named John (v.6)
2. John came as a witness to the light (v.7a)
3. The aim of John's witness is that all may believe (v.7b)

John was on a mission from God. He was sent from God rather than simply being called by God. Being "sent by God" is something we associate with the prophets and saints. Most of us would be more comfortable with using the language of being called. To say "I have been called by God" somehow seems less intimidating, or maybe less arrogant, than "I have been sent by God." A disciple or "listener" is called to sit at the feet of their master and learn. An apostle is literally "one who is sent" on a mission. Pope Francis has repeatedly reminded us we are "missionary disciples." Like John, we have been called to be sent as witnesses.

To what are we witnesses? John reminds us that we are not pointing to ourselves, but we are to testify

to the light. This is a powerful image. To testify to the light presumes that we are in darkness. Have you ever been in complete darkness? Not the darkness of a moonless night, but the pitch darkness hundreds of feet underground at Jenolan caves when the guide turns off their torch? To be in darkness so deep that you can't see your hand waving in front of your face can be suffocating, terrifying.

But in this darkness, John is a voice of hope. The light is real, he tells us. Open your eyes and you will see. His words echo through the wildernesses of our world and our lives. There is tragedy in our lives – sickness, suffering and sorrow. Sin that separates us from God and each other. Hope doesn't make life easy. It makes life possible. Hope reminds us that it won't always be like this. There is light and life coming to us. God already here among us. As missionary disciples we must be people of hope. We point people to Jesus. We testify to the world that God is living and active in our lives, that God's light is shining through our brokenness.

More than just hope, we are called and sent by God to be people of joy. Often our image of John is of a cranky prophet, telling the people that they are sinners and criticising their leaders. But John knew the joy of leaving behind all the attachments and expectations of society and living a truly free life in the service of God. He rejoiced in seeing God's promises brought to fruition. A little later in this Gospel John says regarding Jesus: "Therefore this joy of mine is now complete. He must increase, but I must decrease." (John 3:30)

"I will greatly rejoice in the LORD," proclaims Isaiah, another prophet of hope, in the First Reading. "Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances," says St Paul to us in the Second Reading. Today is Gaudate Sunday, a day we get to tell Father that he looks "pretty in pink", a day of joy as we prepare for the coming of Jesus. Accept this joy into your heart as you recognise who you truly are, your deepest identity: a beloved child of God, a witness to the light, sent by God to bring good news to the oppressed.

Reflection questions:

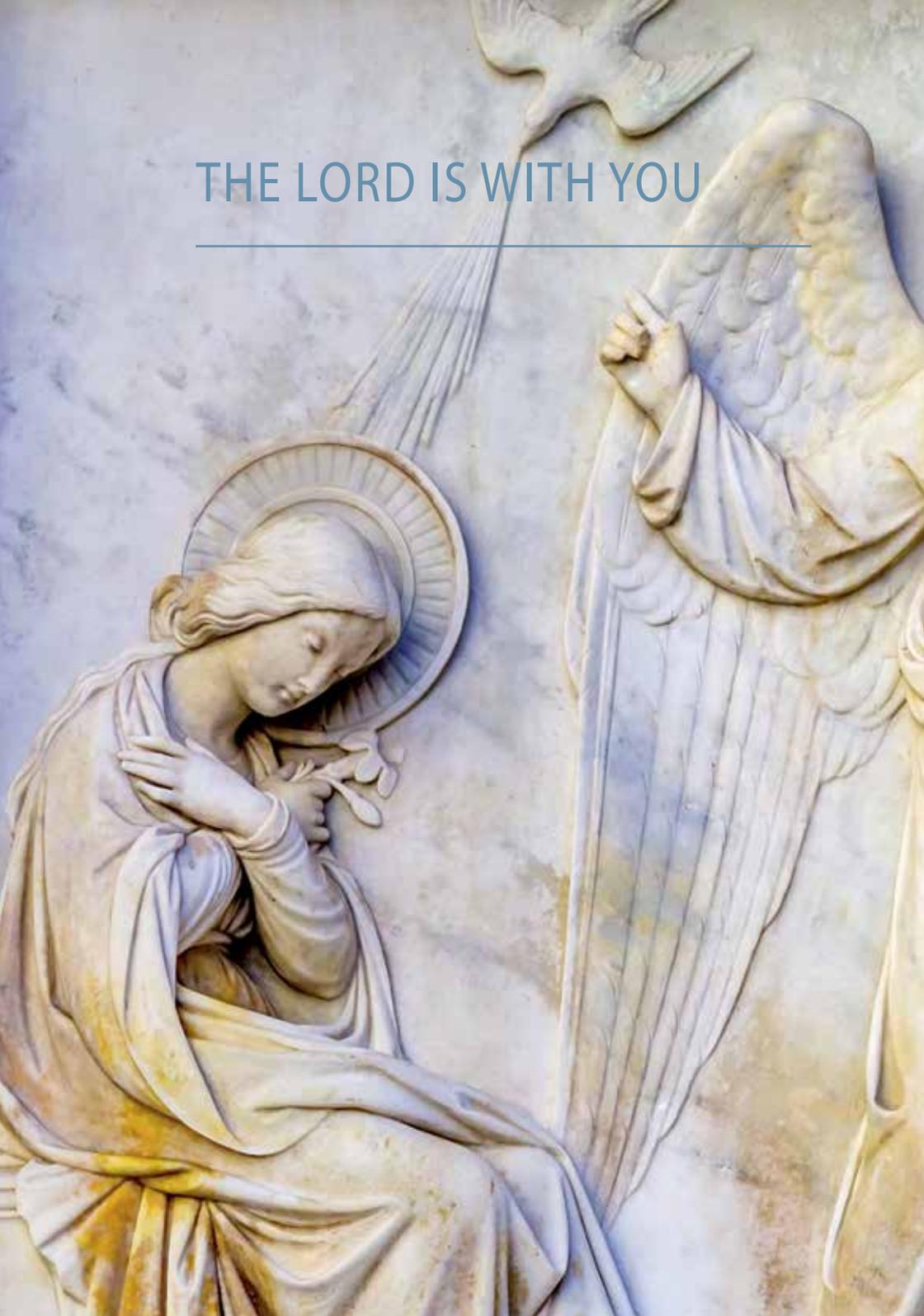
1. How would you answer the question, "Who are you?" How much is being a Christian a part of your identity?
2. As Christians we are both 'called' and 'sent'. Which do you associate with more in your life? How essential is it to be both?
3. How are you sent as a witness to Christ?
4. What does Christian 'hope' mean to you? When going through difficult times, is it easy to maintain hope?
5. How might God 'increase' in me while I 'decrease'?

We who are baptised, children of the Church, we are called to accept ever anew the presence of God among us and to help others to discover Him, or to rediscover what they have forgotten. It is a most beautiful mission, like that of John the Baptist: to direct the people to Christ – not to ourselves! – for He is the destination to which the human heart tends when it seeks joy and happiness.

In today's liturgy St Paul again indicates the conditions for being "missionaries of joy": praying constantly, always giving thanks to God, giving way to his Spirit, seeking the good and avoiding evil (cf. 1 Thess 5:17-22). If this becomes our lifestyle, then the Good News will be able to enter so many homes and help people and families to rediscover that in Jesus lies salvation. In Him it is possible to find interior peace and the strength to face different life situations every day, even the heaviest and most difficult. No one has ever heard of a sad saint with a mournful face. This is unheard of! It would be a contradiction. The Christian's heart is filled with peace because he knows how to place his joy in the Lord even when going through the difficult moments in life. To have faith does not mean to never have difficult moments but to have the strength to face those moments knowing that we are not alone. And this is the peace that God gives to his children.

Pope Francis, 14 December 2014

THE LORD IS WITH YOU



4th Sunday of Advent

2 Samuel 7:1-5, 8-12, 14, 16

7 Now when the king was settled in his house, and the LORD had given him rest from all his enemies around him, ²the king said to the prophet Nathan, "See now, I am living in a house of cedar, but the ark of God stays in a tent." ³Nathan said to the king, "Go, do all that you have in mind; for the LORD is with you." ⁴But that same night the word of the LORD came to Nathan: ⁵Go and tell my servant David: Thus says the LORD: Are you the one to build me a house to live in? ⁸Now therefore thus you shall say to my servant David: Thus says the LORD of hosts: I took you from the pasture, from following the sheep to be prince over my people Israel; ⁹and I have been with you wherever you went, and have cut off all your enemies from before you; and I will make for you a great name, like the name of the great ones of the earth. ¹⁰And I will appoint a place for my people Israel and will plant them, so that they may live in their own place, and be disturbed no more; and evildoers shall afflict them no more, as formerly, ¹¹from the time that I appointed judges over my people Israel; and I will give you rest from all your enemies. Moreover the LORD declares to you that the LORD will make you a house. ¹²When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your ancestors, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come forth from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. ¹⁴I will be a father to him, and he shall be a son to me. When he commits iniquity, I will punish him with a rod such as mortals use, with blows inflicted by human beings. ¹⁶Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me; your throne shall be established forever.

Romans 16:25-27

16 ²⁵Now to God who is able to strengthen you according to my gospel and the proclamation of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery that was kept secret for long ages ²⁶but is now disclosed, and through the prophetic writings is made known to all the Gentiles, according to the command of the eternal God, to bring about the obedience of faith – ²⁷to the only wise God, through Jesus Christ, to whom be the glory forever! Amen.

Luke 1:26-38

1 ²⁶In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, ²⁷to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. ²⁸And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favoured one! The Lord is with you." ²⁹But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. ³⁰The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God. ³¹And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. ³²He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. ³³He will reign over

the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.”³⁴Mary said to the angel, “How can this be, since I am a virgin?”³⁵The angel said to her, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God.³⁶And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren.³⁷For nothing will be impossible with God.”³⁸Then Mary said, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.” Then the angel departed from her.

Reflection

Cristina Gomez

Today’s Gospel reading can make us ask many questions: ‘How was this possible?’; ‘What was Joseph thinking?’; ‘Why did Mary say yes so quickly, and so willingly?’ The story of the annunciation seems so unbelievable. Yet it is our Christian story, the lens in which we are called to see our relationship with God. When we read the annunciation in view of the first and second readings for today, we can begin to understand its significance.

In the first reading, through the prophet Nathan, we hear of God’s commitment to David via a covenant relationship (Sam 7:9). This relationship is unique, eternal, and comes with promises to be fulfilled, both in David’s lifetime and beyond. God first promises to David something similarly promised to his ancestors Abraham and Sarah, that is, land for them and their people (7:10). God then promises David his own son, Solomon, will rule after David’s own reign (7:12-13). God also promises David another ruler from his own line, a Messiah who will come to establish God’s kingdom forever (7:14).

Meanwhile, in the second reading, Saint Paul tells the early Roman community that the God who can strengthen them (Rom 16:25), amidst their difficulties, is the God who was made known to all people (16:26). Jesus’ preaching of the Good News was mainly to the Jewish people but the author of Luke assures Theophilus, the person to whom the Gospel of Luke is addressed, that God wills the salvation of non-Jews or Gentiles as well. We learn from Luke then that God’s offer of salvation is for all. Saint Paul continues on to say that this God also brings about “the obedience of faith.” God is the only wise one among all other gods on offer in the city of Rome and therefore it is this God to whom we should listen.

In light of these two readings, the unusual circumstances of the annunciation make sense. In particular, Mary’s seemingly rash yes is not so rash. Before the Spirit had come upon Mary, she had already been thinking, praying, and waiting with great hope alongside her own people, for the Messiah promised by God to David through Nathan.

Mary’s ‘yes’ or ‘obedience to God’ has also been seen as countering the ‘disobedience of Eve and Adam’. The word ‘obedience’ can be a difficult word for us today because it has associations with power and

its misuse. But the Benedictine tradition teaches us that 'obedience' is much more than about an unquestioned following of authority. Rather, it is about a 'faithful listening'. The Latin root of obedience, *obediere* or *ob(towards) audire* (to hear), tells us too that 'obedience' has a nuanced meaning.

In Adam and Eve, we see ourselves and our tendencies as human beings—tendencies toward love and God, but also toward violence, possession, power, and conflict. Adam and Eve disobeyed because they did not listen to God (Gen 3). Instead they listened to themselves and believed in lies such as God wanting to keep power and knowledge to Godself (Gen 3:4). In contrast, Mary obeyed, because she listened to both herself (Lk 1:29, 34) and her community--their story of God's promises to David and his ancestors and their long history evidencing God's will for their salvation from oppression, fear, and displacement. We see this story of salvation and Mary's embeddedness in it via her Song of Praise (Lk 1:46 – 55), where her first line is joy over God's goodness to her (v.46) and her last line acknowledges God's faithfulness to Abraham and Sarah and their descendants (v.55).

Mary's yes is about God's fulfilment of a promise made to Mary and her people. It is also about God's own promises for us, and a desire to be in a covenant relationship with us. Like God's covenant with David, God promises good things without the condition of our saying yes first to God. We are called like Mary to be open and listen to God through Scripture, our faith communities, our own history of being saved, and even those unlikely persons or circumstances which may in fact be God, calling us to be more loving, to grow, and to reach out to others. In our belief that God is already with us and dwells among us, how will we 'faithfully listen' today? What will we hear and rejoice in? To whom will we say 'yes' to?

Reflection questions:

1. Can I share an example of when God has called me in an unlikely or unexpected way?
2. In what ways do I listen faithfully to what God might be saying to me?
3. How open am I to saying 'yes' to God? How do I discern what this might be?
4. How much of a role does my Church community play in my faith life?
5. How will I seek to strengthen my relationship with Christ this Christmas?

Just as in each of our lives we always need to begin again, to get up again, to rediscover the meaning of the goal of our lives, so also for the great human family it is always necessary to rediscover the common horizon toward which we are journeying. The horizon of hope! This is the horizon that makes for a good journey. The season of Advent ... restores this horizon of hope, a hope which does not disappoint for it is founded on God's Word. A hope which does not disappoint, simply because the Lord never disappoints! He is faithful! He does not disappoint! Let us think about and feel this beauty.

The model of this spiritual disposition, of this way of being and journeying in life, is the Virgin Mary. A simple girl from the country who carries within her heart the fullness of hope in God! In her womb, God's hope took flesh, it became man, it became history: Jesus Christ. Her Magnificat is the canticle of the People of God on a journey, and of all men and women who hope in God and in the power of his mercy. Let us allow ourselves to be guided by her, she who is mother, a mama, and knows how to guide us. Let us allow ourselves to be guided by her during this season of active waiting and watchfulness.

Pope Francis, 1 December 2013

Magnificat

*And Mary said,
'My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour,
for he has looked with favour on the lowliness of his servant.*

*Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
for the Mighty One has done great things for me,
and holy is his name.*

*His mercy is for those who fear him
from generation to generation.*

*He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.*

*He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
and lifted up the lowly;
he has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty.*

*He has helped his servant Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,
according to the promise he made to our ancestors,
to Abraham and to his descendants for ever.'*

Luke 1:46-55

GOOD NEWS OF GREAT JOY



Christmas – Midnight Mass Readings

Isaiah 9:2-7

9²The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness – on them light has shined. ³You 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. ⁴For 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. ⁵For all the boots of the tramping warriors and all the garments rolled in blood shall be burned as fuel for the fire. ⁶For 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. ⁷His 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 onward and forevermore. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this.

Titus 2:11-14

2¹¹For 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

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

⁸In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and

they were terrified. ¹⁰But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see – I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: ¹¹to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord. ¹²This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." ¹³And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, ¹⁴"Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favours!"

Reflection

Deacon Peter McCulloch

And so, once again, Christmas is upon us. For many it's been a struggle to get here, surviving another testing twelve months, navigating another desperate December. Looking back, we can see our world is a harsh, unforgiving place, tossed in turmoil. It's not as kind, it's not as loving as it could be.

Yet here, at Christmas, the air is different. The world's not quite the same. For a moment we ask ourselves why and our thoughts begin to wander. 'Silent Night', 'O Holy Night', the angel choirs sing, taking us to that beautiful boy-child, born of a Virgin in an earthy cave. It's wondrous, but few cared back then. The world slept through this miracle.

Has anything changed? No, the world still sleeps. Yet this story continues to unfold.

2,000 years ago Palestine, too, was a harsh, unforgiving place. Nestling, hidden from Herod's hateful turmoil was the divine silence, the mystical peace of Jesus, Mary and Joseph, eloquently expressing another life, another way.

This is the original Christmas gift: Emmanuel, for God is with us. God is truly one of us and he's here among us still. He's teaching us how to live. But are we listening?

Our gentle reverie takes us into a deeper space, a special place where we'd quite like to stay. The Holy Family lifts us up; our hearts fill with hope, and then a bold idea dawns - things can be different. We don't have to stay the same. For Jesus' birth really happened, and ... maybe it's happening in me today.

Wondering, I look around and see my Christmas tree: brightly ornamented, with colourful presents piled high below. And I realise it's not mere decoration. This tree's a symbol, an image of Christ, as St John Paul II once said. It's the evergreen 'Tree of Life' (Gen 2:9) and evergreens stand for undying life, the eternal life of Christ. Life is 'evergreen' if we make a gift of it. A gift ... 'not of material things, but of life itself: in friendship and sincere affection, in fraternal help and forgiveness, in time shared and reciprocal listening.'¹

I pause and think: Jesus gave himself away (Jn.3:16), so why don't I do the same? 'Give, and it will be given to you' (Lk.6:38) he said. I reflect some more. I wonder how ...

¹Pope St John Paul II, *Angelus Address, 19 December 2004.* (<http://www.fjp2.com/en/john-paul-ii/online-library/angelus-regina-coeli/4020-angelus-19-december-2004-fourth-sunday-of-advent>)

Then those Christmas lights I see. Ah! The new Bethlehem Star, our celestial guides, leading new Wise Men to the Christ-child. Pointing me to the light everlasting, our beacon of hope, ever shining in the darkest of places: transforming, liberating, saving ...

And our Christmas gifts, so lovingly wrapped and ribboned? Yes, they mirror the gold, frankincense and myrrh – the precious gift for he who so abundantly gave of himself. A personal gift to me ... to be opened, treasured and shared ...

My heart is raised high. In joy I see now ... Christmas is not just a day. It's another life, another way. 'What good is it that Christ was born 2,000 years ago, if he's not born now in your heart?' Meister Eckhart said.

Well, today he is born again. Right here in my heart.

My life now is different, and tomorrow will be, too.
O Jesus you have changed me, all for the gift of you.

Reflection questions:

1. **Right now, do I feel the presence of Jesus around me? Where is he symbolically? Where is he spiritually? Where is he practically?**
2. **Not just at Christmas, but every day of the year - Jesus is trying to teach me how to live. Am I listening? How?**
3. **Today Jesus is calling me to another life, another way. Do I hear his call, and how do I respond?**
4. **Following the example of the Magi, Christmas is a time for gifts. What gift will I offer Jesus?**
5. **In the coming year, how will I share the gift of Jesus with others?**

On this holy night, while we contemplate the Infant Jesus just born and placed in the manger, we are invited to reflect. How do we welcome the tenderness of God? Do I allow myself to be taken up by God, to be embraced by him, or do I prevent him from drawing close? "But I am searching for the Lord" - we could respond. Nevertheless, what is most important is not seeking him, but rather allowing him to seek me, find me and caress me with tenderness. The question put to us simply by the Infant's presence is: do I allow God to love me?

Pope Francis, 24 December 2014

Christmas Prayer

Almighty God,

a child is born to us and a Son is given to us.

Your eternal Word leaped down from heaven

in the silent watches of the night,

and now your Church is filled with wonder

at the nearness of her God.

Open our hearts to receive His life

and increase our vision with the rising of dawn,

that our lives may be filled with His glory and His peace,

who lives and reigns for ever and ever.

Amen.



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