



# LECTIO DIVINA

PRAYING THE SCRIPTURES IN ADVENT Year A, 2013

## Lectio divina

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

### *Reading – getting to know the text (senses)*

At this stage we come to know the text in its entirety. We look at it as a whole, embracing all the elements of it. What is the human author trying to tell 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 my 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

### *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”.

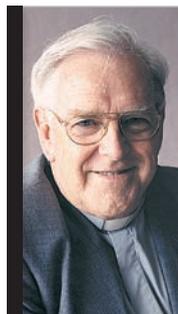
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Shared *lectio* involves hearing the word together, sharing one's initial insights into the text, and then, after a private time for meditation, sharing something of those deeper reflections. After a time of prayer, the text chosen for daily reflection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

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## Bishop David's Introduction



The Vatican Council gave new impetus to the Catholic emphasis on the Word of God. The Scriptures emerged as an essential element in the journey with Jesus to the Father. Catholics took up the study of the bible with renewed interest. At a Synod at the Vatican in the first decade of the twenty first century, the bishops became aware that while the Catholic Church had engaged effectively in the study of the bible, it needed to do more to help believers engage with the Scriptures in their daily lives: not only to study the Scriptures, but to take them up personally in prayer; to make their own the mysteries they contain, and to enter into a deeper intimacy in this encounter with Christ.

A prayerful reading of the Scriptures had been the backbone of monastic life over the centuries, and had been an important help in the spiritual journey of the monks. It focused them on the meaning of their monastic life, and helped them to grow closer to Jesus, and to transform their life in a way that was appropriate for a disciple of Jesus. It was now reaching a much broader audience, and many believers found it an important way to engage with the Scriptures, not in terms of study, but in terms of their relationship with Jesus.

Believers today have taken to this traditional form of praying the Scriptures. It has not replaced our emphasis on the scientific study of the Scriptures: nor should it. However, it has opened up the Scriptures in a new way. The Scriptures have become for many not just information about the mystery of Jesus but a means of engaging with that mystery. If “ignorance of the Scriptures is ignorance of Christ” (St Jerome), then surely a greater familiarity with them leads us to a deeper intimacy with Christ.

During the Advent season we are invited to take up this reflective approach to the Word of God, to see it as an opportunity to enter through a door to a new understanding, renewed memories all of which invites us into a deeper relationship with the One born in time, who lives among us, whose life we share through Baptism, whose coming in glory we await.

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "David L. Walker".

**Bishop David L Walker**  
Bishop of Broken Bay

## 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 on the inside cover at the beginning of this booklet.

To find out more about *lectio divina* and the new *lectio divina* App for mobile devices, please visit [www.dbb.org.au](http://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.

## The Star of Bethlehem

The images throughout this booklet are commonly known in Australia as The Star of Bethlehem, Lily of the Nile, African Lilies, or Agapanthus. These beautiful globes of predominantly purple flowers are a well-recognised reminder that we are approaching the Christmas Season. The soft purple, with a hint of blue, reflect the Church's seasonal colour for Advent, with their gradual awakening from deep-green seed pod to glorious display of blossom – a living example of the preparation and joyous expectation of new life we all share during Advent.

# Advent and Christmas is to be renewed in the reality and implications of the Incarnation.

Do you believe in Santa Claus? At any time in your life have you ascribed to the delightful myth of the red-suited, portly, jolly and bearded, giver of gifts? A figure whose origins are usually associated with the equally mythical St. Nicholas, whose feast day was dropped from the calendar of our Church in 1969 when it was realised that no historical evidence of his existence could be produced, Santa Claus is nevertheless a popular Christmas character among young people in many western cultures. Various called Papa Noël (France), Sinter Claes (Netherlands), Kriss Kringle (from the German *Christ-kindl*), etc., the very idea of Santa Claus evokes excitement and eager anticipation in the hearts of those who prepare for his annual coming. Traditional songs, poems and stories remember and celebrate his appearance. Each year the letters sent to St. Nicholas or Santa Claus, with their lists of desired games, iPads and goodies, offer clear evidence of the firm faith and unflinching confidence of their young authors. No request is considered too great and each is made without a shadow of a doubt that Santa Claus and his elves will come through on Christmas morning.

Inevitably, there comes a time in each child's life, when the wonder of Santa Claus is demythologised; along with the Easter Bunny and the Tooth Fairy, the happy myth of Santa Claus must yield to the realisation that others (parents, guardians, relatives) have been responsible for the joy and plenty of the Christmas season. Included in the process of demythologising Santa is a necessary appreciation of the *true* spirituality of Christmas and of the liturgical season of Advent. For many, however, even their ideas about Christmas and Advent require some measure of demythologisation.

Perhaps it is the traditional trappings of the season or the simplistic notion that Christmas is merely the birthday of Jesus... whatever the reason, many of us become preoccupied with the star, the shepherds and the stable as the representations of a long-ago birth. Retelling the story certainly has its merits provided that *all* the ramifications and dimensions of that event are also appreciated. Each Advent, we celebrate the coming, not only of a baby Jesus born in Bethlehem, but of the risen and universal Christ. Each Advent season, we are plunged into his coming, past, present and future; in a wondrous intermingling of possession and expectation, we celebrate the *abiding* and *saving* presence of Jesus. As Karl Rahner once explained, the liturgy of the Advent season “unites the past, that is, the Old Testament longing for the coming of salvation, that was still hidden in God alone; the present, that is, the salvation that is now taking place in the world but which is still hidden in Christ; and the future, that is, the salvation which will be unveiled with the transformation

of the world at the end of time.” The Church which yearly observes the season of Advent “must make memorial of and re-experience all three mysterious stages of salvation.” (*The Great Church Year*, Crossroads Pub. Co., New York: 1994).

To demythologise Advent and Christmas is to be renewed in the reality and implications of the Incarnation. Because Christ has come once, he will come again; indeed he has never left, but is continually present in his Church. For this reason, Advent is at once a celebration of the Christ who was, who is and always will be. In addition to being a season of the year, Advent is also a mystery; that is to say, it is a present reality that contains and mediates salvation. In his book, *The Revolutionary year*, Jay C. Rochelle underscores the importance of *celebrating* the liturgical mysteries. Celebrations are “a way of organising religious experience throughout the seasons of the revolutionary year and a medium through which God’s love may be experienced in and through others.” Rochelle uses the term “revolutionary year,” explaining that from both an emotional and intellectual perspective, the Church assists us to undergo a personal and communal revolution each year we celebrate it” (*The Revolutionary Year*, Fortress Press, Philadelphia: 1973).

Do you believe in Santa Claus? More importantly, do you believe in Jesus? Over the coming four weeks of Advent, culminating in the Feast of Christmas, the scriptural texts will confront us with the abiding presence of Jesus in the *world*, in the *Church*, in the *Word*, and in the *Bread of Life*. How shall his ever-coming and continual saving presence revolutionize your life this year?<sup>1</sup>

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1 Sanchez Archives, used with permission of Celebration Publications

# FAMILY PRAYER FOR ADVENT

Heavenly Father, we come with thanksgiving for the lives You have given us, for the lives You have sustained through Word and Sacrament, for the lives You have redeemed through Jesus Christ.  
Send now Your Spirit to guide us as we pray in Advent and every day.  
Come, Lord Jesus.

Come into our hearts, repair the brokenness of sin, heal the wounds of mind and spirit, comfort the sick and grieving, warm the cold-hearted, fill the lonely and empty.

Come into our homes, make them grace places, places of forgiveness, of safety, of joy, of peace.

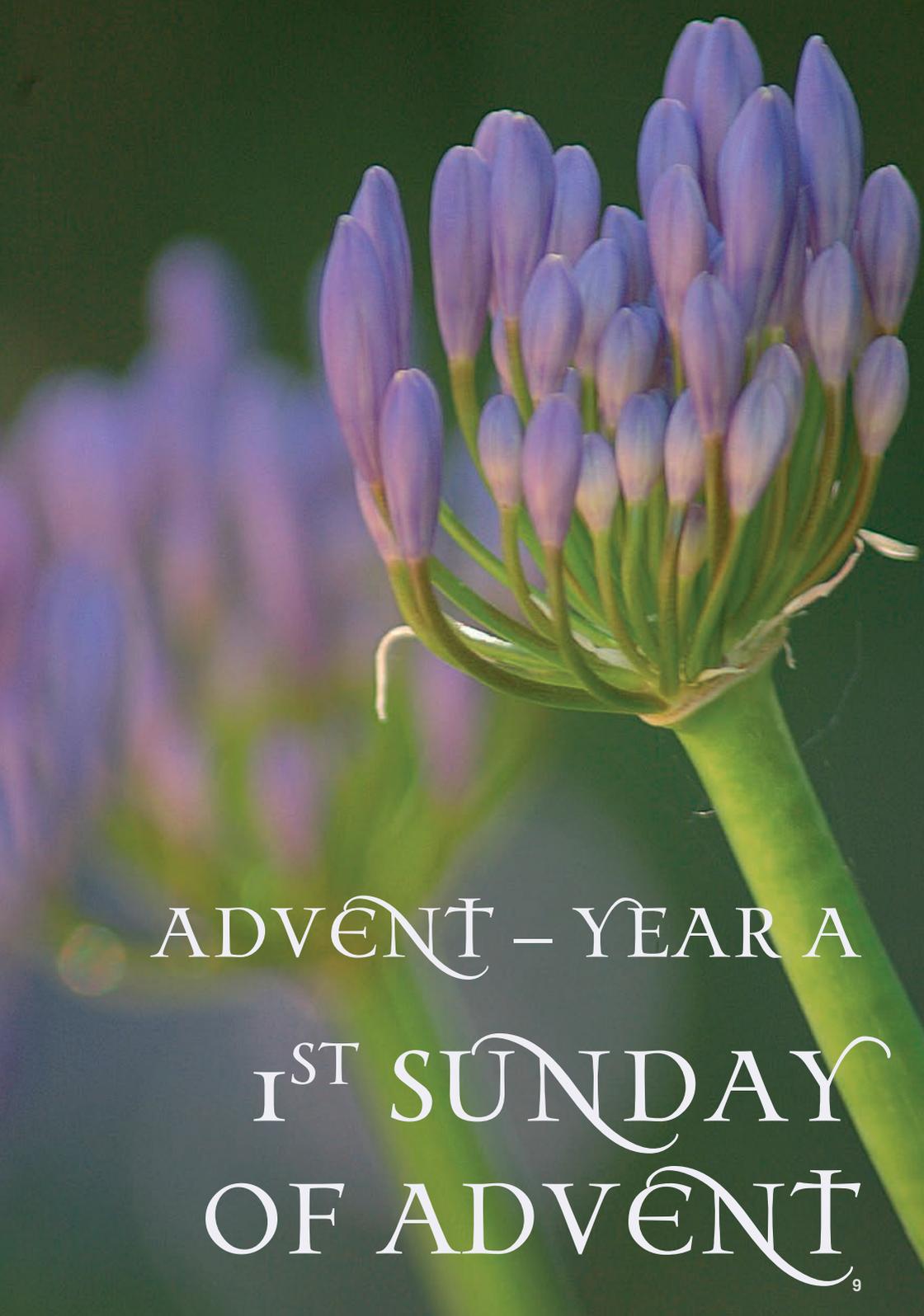
Come to our children, babies, teenagers, adult children and all the ages in between, protect them from anything that would harm them, guide their learning and increase their wisdom as well as knowledge. Let them know love from those around them and the perfect love from You.

Come to our parents, new parents, stepparents, single parents, foster parents, grandparents, and to all who do, did or would care for others. Give them wisdom, courage and the assurance that You are with them every minute as they nurture the lives entrusted to them.

Come to our loved ones, our extended families, our church family, our friends and our neighbours. Thank You for the blessing they are to us and let them experience and extend Your grace into their homes, to their children and their parents.

Come to all hearts and homes, in every country and culture. We ask for their families all the blessings we seek for our own, especially the gift of Your grace.

Come, Lord Jesus, come. Amen.



ADVENT – YEAR A

I<sup>ST</sup> SUNDAY  
OF ADVENT

Today's second and third readings want to place us on red alert! Paul says it's time to wake up from sleep. The Gospel warns us to stay awake and not be caught unaware. The images of what happens to those who are unprepared sound frightening: a thief in the night breaks in; one man in a field is taken and the other one left; one woman grinding at the mill is taken and the other one left. We are warned, "Be prepared."

As we enter the Advent season once more, we are not preparing for the coming of the Christ Child; that already happened more than 2000 years ago. Rather, in Advent we break our normal routine and move into heightened alert to perceive more intensely the ways in which Emmanuel, God-with-us, is moving us toward that vision of peace and unity so eloquently described by Isaiah in the first reading. The prophet dreams of how all people stream toward the city of peace, all dwell in unity, swords are beaten into ploughshares, spears into pruning hooks, and there's no more training for war.

Paul offers concrete advice about how we might do this intense preparation for the coming fullness of the peaceable kingdom. He exhorts Christians to "throw off works of darkness and put on the armour of light." He recognises that the peace of which Isaiah dreamed, and which the coming of Christ brought about in a new way, does not come without a struggle. It takes more than mere wishing and longing to make it a reality. Paul imagines us going onto battle, metaphorically speaking.

To prepare for the struggle, Paul would have us polish up our body armour of virtues. He speaks of the kind of training one must undergo to be able to be the bearers of light. He warns against excesses and indulgences that make one sated and sluggish. Instead, traditional practices of prayer and fasting can carve out an inner space to tend the light we are asked to bear. Paul also warns against rivalry and jealousy. By putting on Christ we don the armaments of forgiveness and community building.

We are urged in the Scriptures of this first Sunday of Advent to go beyond defensive preparations, Readyng ourselves for the full expression of the peaceable kingdom also entails initiating nonviolent action to dismantle weapons of war and transform whatever there may be in our heart that is not yet able to wage peace. Swords are not beaten into ploughshares without intentional acts to dismantle the stockpile of weapons. The Second Vatican Council's "Pastoral Constitution on the Church on the Modern World" also reminds us: "While extravagant sums are being spent for the furnishing of ever new weapons, an adequate remedy cannot be provided for the multiple miseries afflicting the whole modern world." (#81)

Today's Gospel impresses upon us the urgency of engaging in the struggles for peace. The images of the unprepared ones whose homes are broken into or who are left behind are not meant to frighten us, but serve as reminders that there will be a time when all our preparations, all our

attempts to be alert and all our efforts to disarm our hearts and wage peace will, in a critical moment, reach fruition. And we will be ready.

- How do you put on the armour of light?
- What spiritual practices prepare you for the struggle to wage peace?
- How does your faith community take actions to beat swords into ploughshares?<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Barbara Reid OP, America, with permission

## *Isaiah 2:1-5*

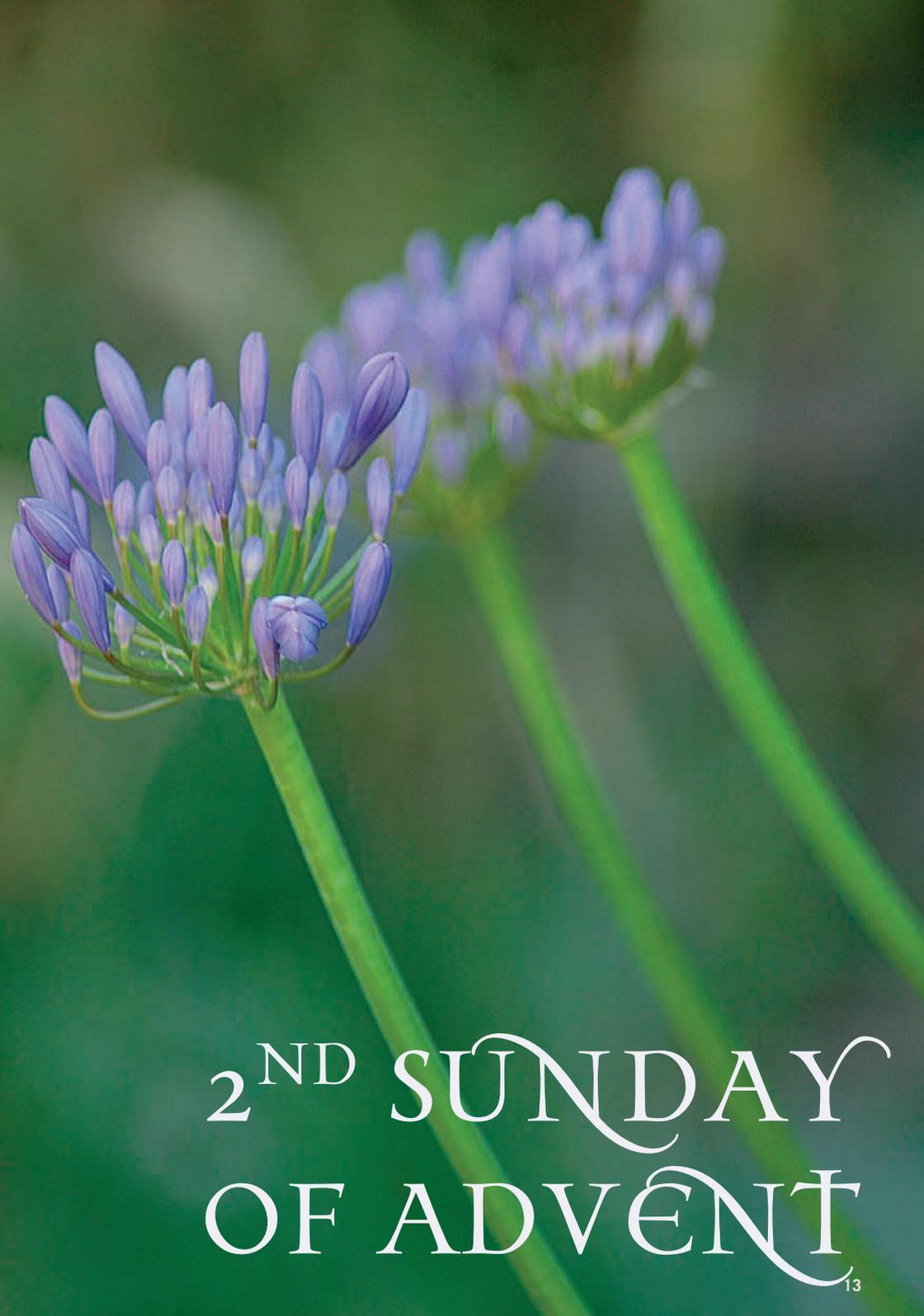
<sup>2</sup>The word that Isaiah son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem.<sup>2</sup>In days to come the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised above the hills; all the nations shall stream to it.<sup>3</sup>Many peoples shall come 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.<sup>4</sup>He 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.<sup>5</sup>O house of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of the LORD!

## *Romans 13:11-14*

<sup>11</sup>Besides 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;<sup>12</sup>the night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armour of light;<sup>13</sup>let us live honourably as in the day, not in revelling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarrelling and jealousy.<sup>14</sup>Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.

## *Matthew 24:37-44*

<sup>37</sup>For as the days of Noah were, so will be the coming of the Son of Man.<sup>38</sup>For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark,<sup>39</sup>and they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away, so too will be the coming of the Son of Man.<sup>40</sup>Then two will be in the field; one will be taken and one will be left.<sup>41</sup>Two women will be grinding meal together; one will be taken and one will be left.<sup>42</sup>Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming.<sup>43</sup>But 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.<sup>44</sup>Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.



2<sup>ND</sup> SUNDAY  
OF ADVENT

**W**aiting, an inevitable and even necessary aspect of human life is not something that most of us relish. We *wait* in lines: in order to purchase groceries; to be served at popular restaurants; to be attended to in a bank; at stop signs and traffic signals; at amusement parks; to see a play or film. We must also *wait* for flowers to grow and bloom; for babies to be born; for wounds to heal; for bread to rise and cheese to age; for children to mature; for friends to call; for love to deepen. Statisticians have estimated that in a lifetime of 70 years, the average person spends at least three years *waiting*!<sup>3</sup>

For believers, however, it is not inconceivable to think of the entire span of a human life as a period of waiting – waiting for the God who comes.

Samuel Beckett, Irish author, critic and playwright, and winner of the Nobel Prize for literature in 1969, cast a rather pessimistic eye on this aspect of the human condition. Along with Albert Camus, Eugène Ionesco and Arthur Adamov, Beckett regarded the very notion of waiting for fulfilment or divine intervention as absurd. In his play, *Waiting for Godot* (1953), two people, Vladimir and Estragon (who are often portrayed as tramps) spend their lives patiently, but aimlessly, waiting for someone who never comes. To exacerbate the situation, the two characters have no evidence that Godot (probably God) intends to come or that he even *exists*. Set on a stage, empty except for a solitary tree, the two figures enunciate Beckett's perception of human existence as mindless and purposeless. At this point, Beckett introduces a second pair of characters who unlike Vladimir and Estragon, pursue and attain their well-defined objectives, e.g. power, wealth, a desirable spouse, yet their lives also are empty and without meaning.

Happily, the Theatre of the Absurd with its hopelessness and pessimism has no place in the life of the believer, except perhaps to renew in him/her a gratitude for the gift of a God who *comes*, who *has* come, who *will* come and who never departs. Because of this, Advent is a season characterised, not by mindlessness and purposelessness but by a delicious joy and eager anticipation.

In the first reading from Isaiah, the prophet gives voice to the eager hopes of his people who confidently awaited the messiah and all that his reign would bring. In the gospel, John the Baptist proclaims that the waiting and messianic longings of his people are to be answered in the person and mission of Jesus. But preparations must be made; through repentance and faith, believers are to prepare a welcome for him in their lives. Paul, in writing to the Romans reminds his readers that those who wait together for the many comings of our God should overlook their differences and sustain one another in mutual support and acceptance.

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3 Sanchez Archives, Celebration Publications, with permission

While we may never learn to enjoy the pragmatic waiting which is a part of our everyday activities, we are reminded, in today's liturgy, to *savour* the joyful waiting which is Advent. He comes; he shall not disappoint. Repentance, faith, and communal harmony are all the welcome he desires.

## *Isaiah 11:1-10*

<sup>1</sup>A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots.<sup>2</sup>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.<sup>3</sup>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;<sup>4</sup>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.<sup>5</sup>Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist, and faithfulness the belt around his loins.<sup>6</sup>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.<sup>7</sup>The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.<sup>8</sup>The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den.<sup>9</sup>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.

<sup>10</sup>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*

<sup>4</sup>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.

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

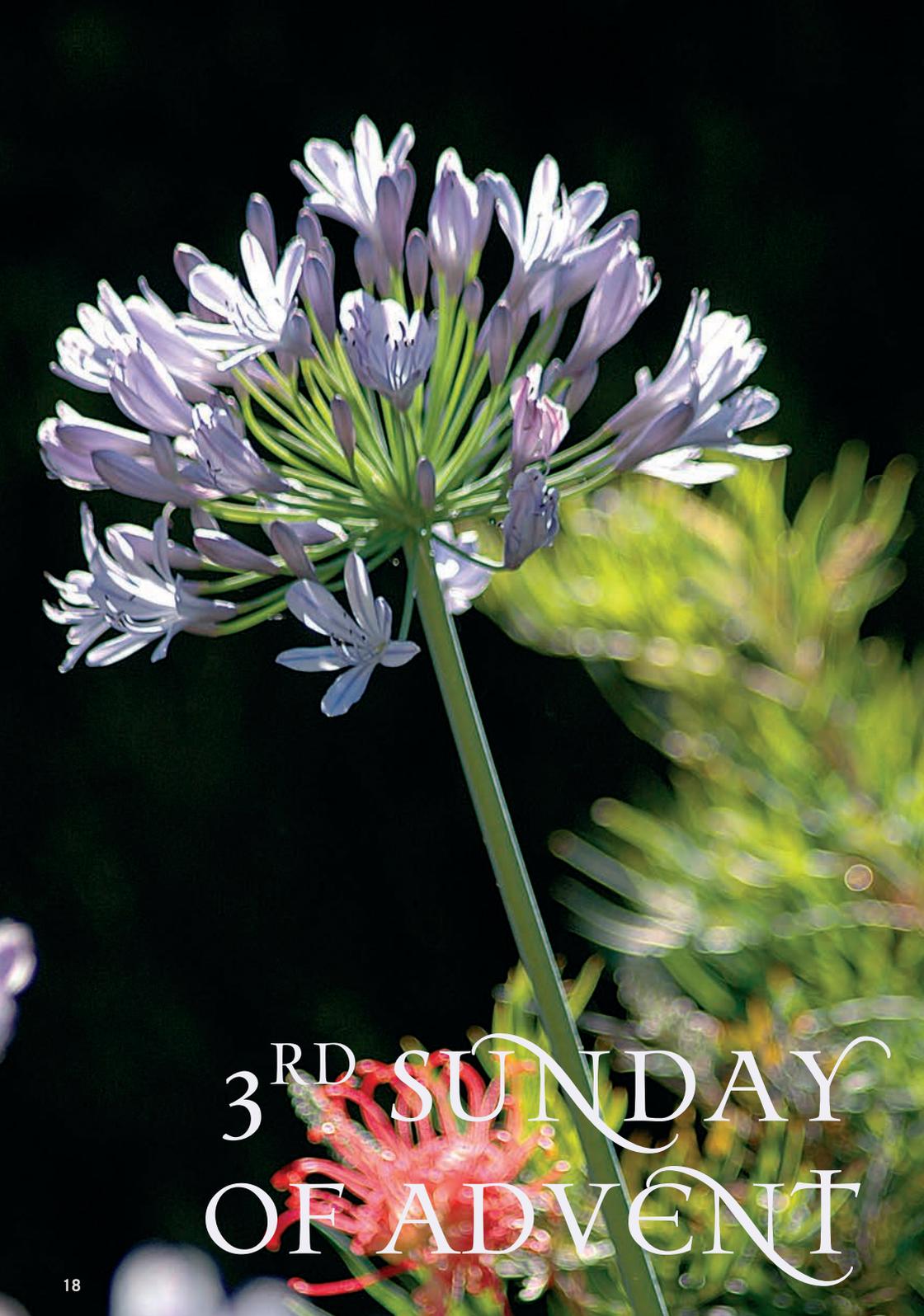
<sup>7</sup>Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God.<sup>8</sup>For I tell you that Christ has become a servant of the circumcised on behalf of the truth of God in order that he might confirm the promises given to the patriarchs,<sup>9</sup>and in order that 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*

<sup>3</sup>In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming,<sup>2</sup>"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near."<sup>3</sup>This 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.'"<sup>4</sup>Now John wore clothing of camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey.<sup>5</sup>Then the people of Jerusalem

and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan,<sup>6</sup>and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

<sup>7</sup>But 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?<sup>8</sup> Bear fruit worthy of repentance.<sup>9</sup> Do 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.<sup>10</sup> Even 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.<sup>11</sup> “I baptize 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 baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.<sup>12</sup> His 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.”



3<sup>RD</sup> SUNDAY  
OF ADVENT

We are well into the season of Advent – a time of preparation and waiting. In the world around us, we have the distractions of shopping, parties, end of year school events, and the need for a good rest.

Advent is indeed a time of waiting. Waiting involves patience.

Today's second reading is all about patience. We hear of how the farmer waits for the rain for the crops. Many Australian farmers can relate to this. We are a country of drought, especially in these Summer times. We wait for rain and when it does arrive, its benefits are widespread. We can see the links of Advent as we wait for Jesus. And what of the benefits when he arrives?

When reading the Gospel from Matthew, we are not waiting for the birth of Jesus; he is already here. John's followers go out looking for Jesus, asking Jesus if he is the Messiah. Jesus tells them to look around them, as proof that he is already with them, and to see what he has been doing.

One message we may take from this reading is that we should be able to see God in the world around us; even though Jesus is God- made- man; God was already with us.

Where do you see God? In creation? In those people around you? In the scriptures?

For some, Jesus is more tangible, and we are disciples of Jesus. As with other relationships, it is up to us to continue to grow our relationship with Jesus – isn't Advent a good time to do this?

## Isaiah 35:1-6, 10

<sup>3</sup>The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom; like the crocus<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup> Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees.<sup>4</sup> Say 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.”

<sup>5</sup>Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped;<sup>6</sup> then 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.<sup>9</sup> And 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

<sup>7</sup>Be 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.<sup>8</sup> You also must be patient. Strengthen your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is near.<sup>9</sup> Beloved, do not grumble against one another, so that you may not be judged. See, the Judge is standing at the doors!<sup>10</sup> As an example of suffering and patience, beloved, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord.

## Matthew 11:2-11

<sup>2</sup>When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples<sup>3</sup> and said to him, “Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?”<sup>4</sup> Jesus answered them, “Go and tell John what you hear and see:<sup>5</sup> the 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.<sup>6</sup> And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me.”

<sup>7</sup>As 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?<sup>8</sup> What then did you go out to see? Someone dressed in soft robes? Look, those who wear soft robes are in royal palaces.<sup>9</sup> What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet.<sup>10</sup> This is the one about whom it is written, ‘See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.’<sup>11</sup> 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.



4<sup>TH</sup> SUNDAY  
OF ADVENT

In today's 1<sup>st</sup> reading the prophet Isaiah tells Ahaz, the king of Judah, that, "therefore 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." 600 years or so later the angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and told him, "Joseph, Son of David, do not be afraid – the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel, which means God is with us."

In his letter to the Romans, Paul reminds us of the promise God made through the prophets, such as Isaiah, that God's son, Jesus, "was descended from David according to the flesh and was declared to be the Son of God with power according to the spirit". When Jesus had been baptised by John in the Jordan as he emerged from the waters of the River Jordan and the waters of *baptismos* cascaded from him the heavens were torn open, the Spirit descended on him like dove and God declared this is my Son, my beloved.

In a few short days we will celebrate with great joy that a young woman, Mary, who was a virgin, who was with child 2,000 years ago, bore a son, Jesus, who is Emmanuel or "God is with Us" incarnate. God has indeed sent us a sign. And what a sign God sent! God sent God's only son, Jesus, the living sign that God is with us.

In a few days we will celebrate again the greatest miracle that you or I will ever experience. We will celebrate that Jesus the Christ, the Son of the living God, became flesh in completion of the promise God made in the prophets. Jesus, the Word of God, took on our humanity so that we may share in his Divinity. What an incredible gift! God fulfilled God's promise by living among us as one of us, so that we may be touched by and may touch the Divine.

We all celebrate Christmas in a different way. Some of us gather on the beach with prawns and salads. Some of us gather in parks, playing cricket and reclining under the trees. Some of us gather in homes crammed with friends and relatives, wearing silly hats and reading awful jokes from Christmas bon bons. Some of us gather with others who have no-one to celebrate Christmas with and together touch the Divine by being with each other. However you may plan to celebrate the great miracle which is Christmas, please take some time to remember the young virgin who brought the Divine into our world. Please take some time to remember the promise made by God through the prophets, fulfilled in the birth of Jesus. Please take some time to remember that the reason for this season is that child, Jesus, Emmanuel, God is with us!

However you celebrate Christmas may the Divine touch you and may you share that touch with the ones you love.

## Isaiah 7:10-14

<sup>10</sup>Again the LORD spoke to Ahaz, saying,<sup>11</sup>Ask a sign of the LORD your God; let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven.<sup>12</sup>But Ahaz said, I will not ask, and I will not put the LORD to the test.<sup>13</sup>Then Isaiah said: “Hear then, O house of David! Is it too little for you to weary mortals, that you weary my God also?<sup>14</sup>Therefore 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,<sup>2</sup>which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy scriptures,<sup>3</sup>the gospel concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh<sup>4</sup>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,<sup>5</sup>through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith among all the Gentiles for the sake of his name,<sup>6</sup>including yourselves who are called to belong to Jesus Christ,<sup>7</sup>To 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.<sup>19</sup>Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly.<sup>20</sup>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.’<sup>21</sup>She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.<sup>22</sup>All this took place to fulfil what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:

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



CHRISTMAS –  
READINGS FOR  
MIDNIGHT MASS

# A CHRISTMAS PRAYER

Max Lucado

Dear Jesus,

It's a good thing you were born at night. This world sure seems dark. I have a good eye for silver linings. But they seem dimmer lately.

These killings, Lord. These children, Lord. Innocence violated. Raw evil demonstrated.

The whole world seems on edge. Trigger-happy. Ticked off. We hear threats of chemical weapons and nuclear bombs. Are we one button-push away from annihilation?

Your world seems a bit darker this Christmas. But you were born in the dark, right? You came at night. The shepherds were nightshift workers. The Wise Men followed a star. Your first cries were heard in the shadows. To see your face, Mary and Joseph needed a candle flame. It was dark. Dark with Herod's jealousy. Dark with Roman oppression. Dark with poverty. Dark with violence.

Herod went on a rampage, killing babies. Joseph took you and your mom into Egypt. You were an immigrant before you were a Nazarene.

Oh, Lord Jesus, you entered the dark world of your day. Won't you enter ours? We are weary of bloodshed. We, like the wise men, are looking for a star. We, like the shepherds, are kneeling at a manger.

This Christmas, we ask you, heal us, help us, be born anew in us.

Hopefully,

Your Children

For us who believe and who celebrate the Word of God made flesh as the source of life and light and truth, Christmas is a renewal of our faith and of our commitment to the challenge of that word.

Let us remember that because of the *incarnation*, we respond, not to a concept or an ideology or a philosophy, but to a living and loving *person*.

- 1. The good news of Christ proclaimed by the church in the pulpit must resound more loudly and more joyfully in the marketplace.*
- 2. No longer through a glass darkly, but in the light of Christ, we behold the fullness of the Father's love).*
- 3. In the word made flesh, God speaks the language of our flesh and blood, in the pulsing of our needs and aspirations and even in the shadows of our sinful darker side.*

## Isaiah 9:2-7

<sup>2</sup>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.<sup>3</sup>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.<sup>4</sup>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.<sup>5</sup>For all the boots of the tramping warriors and all the garments rolled in blood shall be burned as fuel for the fire.<sup>6</sup>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.<sup>7</sup>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 onward and forevermore. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this.

## Titus 2:11-14

<sup>11</sup>For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all,<sup>12</sup>training us to renounce impiety and worldly passions, and in the present age to live lives that are self-controlled, upright, and godly,<sup>13</sup>while we wait for the blessed hope and the manifestation of the glory of our great God and Saviour, Jesus Christ.<sup>14</sup>He it is who gave himself for us that he might redeem us from all iniquity and purify for himself a people of his own who are zealous for good deeds.

## Luke 2:1-14

<sup>2</sup>In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered.<sup>2</sup>This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria.<sup>3</sup>All went to their own towns to be registered.<sup>4</sup>Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David.<sup>5</sup>He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child.<sup>6</sup>While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child.<sup>7</sup>And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

<sup>8</sup>In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night.<sup>9</sup>Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified.<sup>10</sup>But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid; for see – I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people:<sup>11</sup>to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord.<sup>12</sup>This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.”<sup>13</sup>And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,<sup>14</sup>“Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favours!”

# EPIPHANY



Each day of our lives we are called to appropriate the gift which is offered to us in him. Salvation did not drop from the sky like a blanket (or *deus ex machina*) on an unsuspecting world, covering all with its warmth and security. Salvation, rather came in the form of a *gift* which must be accepted and “unwrapped” in order to be fully appropriated. Salvation came in human form as a *person* who must be welcomed, loved, heeded and followed.

Given that focus then, all subsequent gift giving and receiving should be understood as a reflection of and a response to the ultimate GIFT. In his reflection on this particular feast, Charles A. Curran has remarked that the practice of gift giving is truly redemptive. “A gift says I care about you. Because of such gifts we come to sense our own special worth to other people. We are honoured and dignified by them and we are, in a very literal way, redeemed. Receiving a gift impresses us with a deep sense of our own meaning and so helps us to see ourselves in a more noble and respectful light.” (*The Word Becomes Flesh, A Psychodynamic Approach to Homiletics and Catechesis and Meditations*, Loyola University Press, Chicago: 1974).

Through the gift of Jesus, celebrated once again on this feast of Epiphany as universal saviour, God had revealed to us our special worth. Because of Jesus, we are honoured, dignified, and redeemed. Today, as we appropriate anew the saving power of God in Christ, we are thereby challenged to offer similar gifts to one another, viz. gifts which honour, dignify and redeem.

## Isaiah 60:1-9

60 Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you.<sup>2</sup>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.<sup>3</sup>Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn.<sup>4</sup>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.<sup>5</sup>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.<sup>6</sup>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.<sup>7</sup>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.<sup>8</sup>Who are these that fly like a cloud, and like doves to their windows?

<sup>9</sup>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 – <sup>2</sup>for surely you have already heard of the commission of God's grace that was given me for you,<sup>3</sup>and how the mystery was made known to me by revelation, as I wrote above in a few words,<sup>4</sup>a reading of which will enable you to perceive my understanding of the mystery of Christ.<sup>5</sup>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:<sup>6</sup>that is, the Gentiles have become fellow heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.<sup>7</sup>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.<sup>8</sup>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,<sup>9</sup>and to make everyone see what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things;<sup>10</sup>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.<sup>11</sup>This was in accordance with the eternal purpose that he has carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord,<sup>12</sup>in whom we have access to God in boldness and confidence through faith in him.

## Matthew 2:1-12

2In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem,<sup>2</sup>asking, “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.”<sup>3</sup>When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him;<sup>4</sup>and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born.<sup>5</sup>They told him, “In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:<sup>6</sup>“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.”<sup>7</sup>Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared.<sup>8</sup>Then 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.”

<sup>9</sup>When 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.<sup>10</sup>When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy.<sup>11</sup>On 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.<sup>12</sup>And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

# EPIPHANY HYMN OF ST AMBROSE

Most High God!  
Thou that enkindlest  
the fires of the shining stars!  
O Jesus!  
Thou that art peace and life and light and truth,  
hear and grant our prayers.

This present day has been made holy  
by thy mystic baptism,  
whereby thou didst sanctify  
those waters of the Jordan,  
which of old were thrice turned back.

It is holy by the star shining in the heavens,  
whereby thou didst announce  
thy Virginal Mother's delivery  
and didst, on the same day,  
lead the Magi to adore thee in thy crib.

It is holy too,  
by thy changing the water  
of the pitchers into wine;  
which the steward of the feast,  
knowing that he had not so filled them,  
drew forth for the guests.

Glory be to thee, O Lord Jesus,  
that didst appear on this Day!  
And to the Father and to the Holy Spirit,  
for everlasting ages. Amen.

*Hymn of St. Ambrose (338-397), used by the Church in Milan*



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