

C H O S E N



ADVENT & CHRISTMAS
DAILY REFLECTIONS 2017

C O N T E N T S

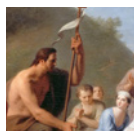
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1ST WEEK OF ADVENT

3 December–9 December

7



2ND WEEK OF ADVENT

10 December–16 December

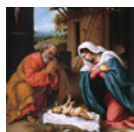
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3RD WEEK OF ADVENT

17 December–24 December

31



CHRISTMAS OCTAVE

25 December–1 January

43



BAPTISM OF THE LORD

2 January–8 January

53



CATHOLIC DIOCESE OF
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This is a gift to

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C H O S E N

Chosen by grace,
may you know this Christmas
that your roots, as a child of God,
are in ***eternity***—
in the ***infinite*** mind and heart of God.

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from

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Isaiah 63:16–17; 64:1.3–8.
Psalm 79:2–3. 15–16. 18–19
1 Corinthians 1:3–9
Mark 13:33–37

3 DECEMBER 2017
■ *1st Sunday of Advent*

So stay awake, because you do not know when the master of the house is coming. MARK 13:35

Oh! It's the start of Advent again when the Church's liturgical year begins by focussing on the second coming of Christ before honing in on his first coming in Bethlehem in the final nine days of this short season.

But, have you ever noticed how constant the theme of Jesus Christ coming again is found in the ordinary texts of our Mass, quite apart from the season of Advent? For example, "You will come again in glory with salvation for your people, Lord have mercy" (Penitential Rite). "Seated at the right hand of God the Father Almighty; from there he will come to judge the living and the dead" (Apostles Creed). "We proclaim your death, O Lord, and profess your resurrection, until you come again" (Memorial Acclamation).

None of us know when Jesus will come again in glory, nor do we know the day when we will die. Yet, God continues to enter our lives in unexpected ways. Our challenge this Advent—in the midst of hectic end-of-year activities—is to use these short daily reflections as an opportunity to be still each day, listen to God, and reflect on how God is entering into our lives in unexpected ways. When we take the time to stop, listen and be conscious of God's presence in our lives, a new dimension of prayer will open up for us. We will hear God's quiet voice of peace and begin to see his saving hand in our lives.

Lord God, help us to be still and know that you are God and that you are constantly entering our lives to keep us "steady and without blame until the last day, the day of our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Corinthians 1:8). Amen.

BISHOP PETER INGHAM

All the nations will stream to it. ISAIAH 2:2

The first reading describes the radically inclusive nature of the kingdom of God, “All the nations will stream to it,” while the gospel today provides the radical embodiment of what this looked like in the ministry of Jesus. While Jesus is in Capernaum, a Centurion—that is, a Roman military officer who commanded up to 100 soldiers—approaches Jesus and begs him to heal his slave.

St Matthew tells us that the Centurion *parakaleo's* Jesus—he summons him, implores him, urges him. Across the pages of Scripture, we encounter a God who always hears the cry of the poor. When Moses pauses long enough at the burning bush to realise that it is not being consumed (Exodus 3), he is able to hear the voice of God who tells him, “I have seen the misery of my people and I have heard their cry of distress.” God always hears the cry of the distressed.

The Centurion was not one of the insiders. He was a foreigner and an enemy of the Jewish people. Yet, Jesus hears his cry and answers his request to cure his servant. Neither was worthy, yet, Jesus responds like his Father to answer their deepest need.

Jesus is still listening to the cry of our hearts. He still longs to respond to us, to heal us, to restore us. We don't have to be perfect insiders for God to hear our cry. All we need is the courage and trust to cry out to God. He will hear our prayer.

Jesus, give us the grace to trust in you, that you always hear the cry of the poor. Amen.

FR RICHARD HEALEY

Trust in the Lord. ISAIAH 26:4

Something I have struggled with over the years is a desire or instinct to be self-sufficient. Are you familiar with this temptation? “Sure God, I trust you, but I have a plan B, C, D and E tucked in my back pocket just in case.” We know and are known by a God whose Spirit permeates the whole of creation—the Rock of Ages who has been proven faithful by his actions and intervention. And what is asked of us in return? To love with all our heart, mind and strength. To trust in the Lord.

“I trust you.” The Lord may reply, “Then open your eyes, for the ways I am working on your behalf and offering a way forward, there is more than one, and they are marked with peace.”

“I surrender.” The Lord may say, “Then let go of your anxiety and attempt to control, and feel my peace enter.”

“I believe.” The Lord may implore, “Then make a choice to pray with conviction. Beg me not for your outcome, but for the graces you need.”

“I love you.” The Lord may tenderly reply, “Then abandon your attempts to make yourself happy and follow the promptings of my Spirit. Stay alert and trust your inner-voice of love.”

These are my own examples of acting on the words which are the foundation of my faith life, framed by today’s gospel. May you, in this special time of Advent, listen attentively to your own faith foundations. God might encourage you to turn them from sand to rock by your actions of trust.

Lord, Lord. I desire to do your will. I want, and I choose, that which leads to your deepening life in me. Amen.

13 DECEMBER 2017

Saint Lucy ■

Isaiah 40:25–31
Psalm 102:1–4. 8. 10
Matthew 11:28–30

Yes, my yoke is easy and my burden light.

MATTHEW 11:30

These words of Jesus confused me for a long time. Why didn't Jesus say something like, "I free you from your earthly yokes," or, even, "Unshackle yourself and be slaves no longer."? I don't want a yoke or a burden, no matter how easy and light. I want to be free!

So often we think that when we shed ourselves of our responsibilities and commitments, and when we can live as we'd like—without the demands of family and social opinion, law and morality—that is the time when we will finally be happy in a life of our own creation. However, desiring *that* freedom, *that* kind of happiness, rests on an illusion about who we are as humans and how we find fulfilment.

Isaiah describes a God who knows us, just as we know the rhythms of nature. When today's psalmist sings, "All my being bless his holy name," he doesn't reserve prayer to his mind alone, or his heart alone, or his body alone. Rather, he bids that his *whole being* harmonise in blessing God. The God who made us knows us, and he calls us to a particular life. Our deepest joy is not about freedom from responsibility, but freedom to choose to act in accordance with how God chose to make us. When our lives align with how we are made to be in this world, then will we find rest for our souls. Then our yoke will be easy and the burdens will be light.

Holy Spirit, show me who I am meant to be and give me the courage to live that out. Amen.

MR JAMES ARBLASTER

Whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me, says the Lord. COMMUNION ANTIPHON

This is a hard saying and one that St John of the Cross knew very well. Two things, it seems to me, stand out in this.

Firstly, do we really want to come after Jesus as his disciple? Some say they do, but there is a little more to it than that. I read somewhere that a famous medical professor was once approached by someone with reference to a young aspiring doctor, “[So-and-so] tells me he was one of your students.” The response came quickly, “He may have attended my lectures, but he was not one of my students.” In agreeing to be disciples, we are agreeing to do, and be, more than someone who just comes to the lectures (who just goes to church.)

Secondly, a real disciple knows that there is a cost and an ongoing death. This is where many “students” give up. I heard someone say once when things were hard for her, “My God wouldn’t ask this of me.” The truth, of course, is that if we are real disciples, as was St John of the Cross, then our God has the right to ask anything of us, and we have the joy of giving him everything, right down to the smallest inconvenience. Only friends can ask the hard things!

O Blessed Cross that takes me to the Father, open your arms to me every day and allow me to know the embrace of the Father. Amen.

SR HILDA SCOTT OSB



THIRD

week of advent



The Meeting of Mary and Elizabeth

CARL HEINRICH BLOCH (1834–1890)

"The Meeting of Mary and Elizabeth" c. 1866
Oil on copper. Frederiksborg Slot (Denmark-Hillerod). Public Domain.

Many will be familiar with the art of Carl Heinrich Bloch. His many scenes from the life of Christ illustrate bibles and devotional manuals. Bloch was born in Copenhagen, Denmark, in 1834. While his parents wished him to enter the Navy, Bloch's only interest was painting. On his way to study art in Italy, he passed through the Netherlands and became acquainted with the work of Rembrandt. For seven years he lived in Italy, soaking up the Italian masters. Returning to Denmark, he was commissioned to produce 23 paintings for the chapel of Frederiksborg Palace. He died in 1890, "An abrupt blow for Nordic art," as an article by Sophus Michaelis stated.

Bloch's works are popular because they are full of realism, and *The Meeting of Mary and Elizabeth* is no exception. It is not hard to imagine you're actually watching the original scene. You can almost see the movement in Elizabeth's

continued on next page ►

arms, ready to embrace her younger cousin. It is a meeting of two mothers, but there is a profound difference. Elizabeth has conceived in the natural order, even though aged. A greater work of grace is present in Mary. Her Perpetual Virginity is symbolised by the lily against whose container Mary rests her hand.

The first miracle recorded in the New Testament comes about at the sound of Mary's voice—the sanctification of John the Baptist in his mother's womb, "For the moment your greeting reached my ears, the child in my womb leapt for joy" (Luke 1:44). St Luke pictures Mary as the new Ark of the Covenant, carrying not the tablets of the Law, but the Lawmaker himself. Not just a bowl of manna, but the True Bread from Heaven (John 6:32). Not just the priestly staff of Aaron, but Christ the High Priest (Hebrews 4:14). Just as David had danced before the Ark which housed God's presence (2 Samuel 6:14), so John dances before his Maker. It is an unborn child who first recognises the incarnate God.

The New Testament's second miracle will also occur at the sound of Mary's voice—the changing of water into wine at the wedding feast of Cana, hinted at by the serving girl in the upper right hand corner carrying a water jar. The real effect of this miracle will be the stirrings of faith in the hearts of the apostles. Mary is always striving to evoke our faith in her Son. "Do whatever he tells you" (John 2:5).

But there was a price to pay. Christ knew his miracles would enrage the Pharisees and lead ultimately to his death. So he warns his mother. Most bibles will give us the translation, "Woman, why turn to me? My hour has not come yet" (John 2:4). However, the Greek literally says, "Woman, what to me, to thee," meaning, she will have to share in his destiny. Without hesitation, she says to the wine servants, "Do whatever he tells you" (John 2:5). Perhaps Bloch is hinting at this, as Elizabeth's outstretched arms seem to form a cross.

One cannot help but notice the differences between Elizabeth's garments and Mary's. Elizabeth wears a heavy veil, and you would expect Mary to be in a travelling veil, having just completed a very taxing journey. But no, Mary's veil is almost bride-like. She is the spouse of the Holy Spirit whose action is so prominent in this encounter.

Visitation is a great ministry, one rooted in the gospel, "[I was] sick and you visited me, in prison and you came to see me" (Matthew 25:36). Sadly, it is a ministry in danger of dying out in modern times; the phone and text-messaging has taken over. But they are not the same. Visitation is not always an easy ministry, but a very fruitful one, not just for the one visited, but also for the visitor. We are also enriched—one is blessed by receiving; the other by giving. Christmas is a great time for visiting people we may have neglected all year long. But it is also a time to open ourselves to the God who wishes to visit us.

FR GRAHAM SCHMITZER

17 DECEMBER 2017

3rd Sunday of Advent ■

Isaiah 61:1–2, 10–11
Luke 1:46–50, 53–54
1 Thessalonians 5:16–24
John 1:6–8, 19–28

“I am, as Isaiah prophesied: a voice that cries in the wilderness: Make a straight way for the Lord.” JOHN 1:23

On the third Sunday of Advent, the Church always presents her children with the person of John the Baptist—an obscure figure with an apocalyptic message. At that time, the Jewish people were expecting the coming of the Christ with urgency, so much so that by the end of the First Century, three other men had already claimed to be the Christ.

It is not surprising, therefore, that the priests and Levites ask him a series of questions about his identity. Moreover, as the son of a priest, John the Baptist would by rights have been serving as a priest in the Temple, and yet, here he is serving as a prophet in the wilderness!

John, however, was listening to a different voice. He was content in fulfilling his mission as the one to prepare the way for the Christ. He found his joy because he accepted his own particular call from God even though he was unworthy to undo the sandal-strap of the Messiah (John 1:27).

Joy does not come because we are doing the greatest things, or the things that bring the greatest honour. Rather, it comes because we find ourselves mysteriously caught up in the work of Christ and finding our meaning in serving him. He is the giver of all true joy.

May we—who are also chosen to prepare the way for the Messiah into our hearts this Advent—know how to find our joy in Christ. Amen.

FR MARK DE BATTISTA

**On you [O Lord] I have leaned from my birth,
from my mother's womb you have been my
help.** RESPONSORIAL PSALM

Both Samson and John's parents doubted the angel's message to them. Both their parents were old—barren, beyond their prime and on the downward side of their life (and the very bottom of that side at that!) They would be the last people expected to be chosen for such an integral part of God's plan for our salvation, but that is exactly what happened. Thankfully, because of their faith and in spite of their understandable doubts, they responded to God's call and said "yes".

Much focus in the Church today is on the legitimate and critically necessary place of young people. But, let's not forget the equally central role of older people. Their wisdom, life experience and example are what will propel younger people to embrace their own vocation with joy and love. If this is missing, then so too will the positive response of the young to God's call for them. The "yes" of their parents response and faith-filled example enabled Samson and John to joyfully embrace their own vocation with a full-hearted "yes" to God also. The young are the mirrors of their elders. May the image reflected to them be worthy of their emulation.

Lord Jesus, by your grace, may I never doubt your word to me. In the midst of my uncertainties and my fears, lift me up to say "yes" to you. Mary, my Mother, help me to be faithful to Jesus and his call for my life—from my youth to the eventide of my life. Amen.

FR CHRISTOPHER G SARKIS

Numbers 6:22–27
Psalm 66:2–3. 5. 6. 8
Galatians 4:4–7
Luke 2:16–21

1 JANUARY 2018
☐ *Solemnity of Mary,
the Holy Mother of God*

As for Mary, she treasured all these things and pondered them in her heart. LUKE 2:19

The Greek word for “pondering” is *symballousa*. It implies a careful consideration of all the factors involved, and, as a present participle, denotes that something is underway. Mary would have continued to ponder these events, trusting that the meaning would one day become clear.

To ponder in the heart is a kind of wholistic response to what is of God. It is a way of prayer; of living; a way of being. We might imagine Mary, over-and-over again, unpacking the events of Jesus’ life and spreading them out on the table of her heart. One day she might place the shepherds’ words beside those from one of the prophets. Another day she might compare them with the words of the angel Gabriel. She might do the same when Jesus was lost in the Temple. The emphasis is not on facts, but on their significance.

So, what is your pondering like as this new year begins? It is not helpful to dwell on the past, particularly those incidents that take us into negativity. Instead, let us ensure that in the spirit of Mary’s *symballousa*, we consider the many gifts and blessings of this season carefully, and then look forward in faith and hope, trusting in the joy they will bring to us, and, through us, to others.

Lord God, Mary treasured and pondered the life of Jesus in her heart. May we do so too each day this year. Amen.

MS MICHELLE VASS