



DIOCESE OF Hexham & Newcastle

Reflections for the Season of Advent



Advent | 2023

Reflections for Advent 2023

An Introduction

Seamus Heaney, the Irish poet who died 10 years ago, said that his Catholic upbringing gave him the right to joy. He remembered the radiance of Catholicism, which gave everything in the world meaning and showed the shimmering edges of things, and the benediction of it all. Heaney's words remind us that Advent embarks on a season of joy and radiance, of meaning and shimmering, and blessedness. Advent challenges us to look afresh at the mystery of our faith, the joy of our hope and the longing of our love. As we celebrate the saving work of Christ and the light it sheds on the world, we do so in prayerful preparation with Pope Francis for the Pilgrims of Hope Jubilee in 2025.

These Advent resources shed light into the shadows of our lives as we pray through these days towards Christmas. This is a time to stretch and arouse our imagination for the Lord's coming as judge and new-born child. And we do so in the radiance of candles lit on the Advent Wreath, seeking deeper meaning to our faith set shimmering by the Holy Spirit in the truth of our living, and showers us with the blessedness of our Heavenly Father.

As Pilgrims of Hope, we walk the Advent way of waiting, conversion and hope. We wait for the first, humble coming of Jesus in our flesh and wait for his final, glorious coming as Lord of history and universal Judge. We are called to conversion in the Advent liturgy through the prophets and especially John the Baptist: "Repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Mt 3:2). Our joyful hope shimmers with the truth that salvation is already accomplished by Christ (Romans 8:24-25) and that God's grace in the world reaches its fullness, granting us what is promised by faith, that "we shall become like him for we shall see him as he really is" (John 3:2). The Christmas angel's message of glory to God and peace radiates the blessedness of the Lord's birth: "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace!" (Luke 2:14).

Enjoy these reflections and prayers. Happy Advent!



Monsignor Andrew Faley
Episcopal Vicar for the Vicariate for Faith & Mission

First Week of Advent

Sunday 3 December 2023

First Reading: Isaiah 63:16-17, 64:3-8; Psalm: Psalms 79:2-3, 15-16, 18-19;

Second Reading: First Corinthians 1:3-9; Gospel: Mark 13:33-37

How often do we feel like the prophet Isaiah in today's first reading? We look around and we see God being ignored and deserted by all. Even we, His own people, wander from His ways and behave as if we had never heard His message. This might make us feel isolated and useless because we know that, away from God, we can do nothing. When we turn away from him, we end up swept away like dead leaves.

But guess what? Whenever we wander, He is still our Father, and it is only through Him, with Him and in Him that we will find our ultimate fulfilment. Every time we turn back to Him, he welcomes us again into His perfect love, and guide us along the path linked to our salvation. God and His people still yearn for each other. When we respond to God's calling and receive his message, we are made rich in all things, and we can wait for God's coming joyfully and confidently.

Today, we are entering into the waiting time of Advent, and Mark tells us what to do, so we can avoid repeating the errors that Isaiah lamented about. From generation to generation, we must pray and keep watch. Pray, so that there always will be someone who calls upon the name of the Lord. And watch, not only for His return, but also over what he has entrusted to us.

In this first Sunday in Advent, let us remember that God has already pointed us in the right direction. Let us be brave and keep walking in his ways, open and eager for His loving embrace. Let us be witnesses to our world that God's promise and blessing are ever present to us, His people of Faith who are called by His name, now as we wait for Him and until He comes again. Amen.

First Week of Advent

Monday 4 December 2023

First Reading: Isaiah 2:1-5 Psalm: Psalms 121:1-2,4-5,6-9;

Gospel: Matthew 8:5-11

Asking for help when we need it can be a really difficult thing to do. Whether it's through fear of being judged, uncertainty of the outcome, or even simply our own pride, a study conducted in America showed that out of two thousand people, 73% choose not to ask for help before they absolutely need it.¹ A staggering figure, it brings home the need to recognise that we just can't do life alone.

In today's Gospel, we hear of the centurion with great faith who asked Jesus to heal his servant. A centurion in the time of the Roman Emperor was a military commander, with a unit of normally around one hundred people. This was a man of authority and status, likely a man who would not ask for help often, and yet here his vulnerability breaks through, asking Jesus for help. He asked Jesus to do what only He could do, and the result is a beautiful conversation between a man, who for perhaps the first time isn't defined by rank, but by faith.

Like so many of us, the centurion doubts his worthiness to be in receipt of such a miracle from Jesus. Yet, despite all this, Jesus changes his perspective, not only showing him he is worthy, but commends him for his 'great faith'.

Today, we are reminded that we are worthy to come to the Father, not by our own merits or worldly qualifications, but because He made us worthy in His own image. No matter what our background, the Father is waiting for us to come to Him, just as He came to us in a stable all those years ago. This Advent, as we prepare for the coming of the Lord in a stable, let us remember we are all worthy to come into the presence of the King with humility, faith and great expectancy.

¹ Melore, C (2022) *Stubborn nation: 3 in 4 people don't ask for help until they absolutely need it*. Available at: <https://studyfinds.org/stubborn-nation-asking-for-help>.

First Week of Advent

Tuesday 5 December 2023

First Reading: Isaiah 11:1-10; Psalm, Psalms 71:1-2, 7-8, 12-13, 17;

Gospel, Luke 10:21-24

St Mary's was busy last week with the Year 1 school children at the front of the church for daily Mass. They were quiet but very squirmy, turning and waving frantically to their parents - all except a little girl sitting at the end of the aisle. Just before Mass began, a man walked hesitantly down towards her and tapped her on the shoulder. She turned to look up, and when she saw him her face was flooded with such overwhelming love and joy that it brought tears to the eyes of all of us watching. She didn't stand up, and she made no noise, but hugged her father's leg fiercely and kissed his hand, and turned to watch every step as he went and hurried to the back of church before Mass began.

We are told today in the Gospel that the Ruach HaKodesh, in Hebrew the Breath of Holiness, such a beautiful name, filled Jesus with great love and rejoicing in the elation of the disciples' return. In the same way, when Our Lady spoke her words in the Magnificat she was 'rejoicing in God my Saviour,' having been filled through the Breath with the Holiest of all creation, Jesus himself.

The overwhelming feeling of Joy that both Jesus and Mary were consumed by, and the rapture of the saints and angels in Heaven, is that same Breath of the Spirit that surrounds us in our faith. No matter what happens to us in this life we know that Spirit is always with us. On our final day on earth the Lord will come to carry us home, and we will rejoice at the sight of Him like a five year old child at the sight of her father, and our love and joy will never end.

Reflection written by: Sue Oxley, St Mary's Church, Cullercoats

First Week of Advent

Wednesday 6 December 2023

First Reading: Isaiah 25:6-10; Psalm: Psalm 22;

Gospel: Matthew 15:29-37

At Mass, when we hear the words of Jesus, "Do this in memory of me", what do they mean to us? Is it just that Jesus commands us to re-enact the Last Supper and receive, in Holy Communion, the body and blood of Christ, 'in memory of' or 'as a memorial of' Jesus? But this 'memory' or 'memorial' is not like a photograph or a gravestone that simply reminds us of a dead person. It brings the living Jesus Christ actively into our present day experience. Why does Jesus give his living self to us in this way?

"Do this"; - what is the 'this' that Jesus commands us to do? If it is simply to come to Mass, receive Holy Communion and then go back to our ordinary unchanged and unchallenged lives, then we are missing the point.

Today's Gospel recounts how Jesus miraculously healed sickness and fed the hungry; not so that he would be acclaimed as a hero, but to demonstrate the truth that God is amongst us, that He wants to cure our spiritual lameness or blindness and feed us with His truth - because He is our loving Father.

Surely this is part of the 'this' that Jesus commands us to do; to "love one another just as I have loved you"; to heal those who are hurting, to feed those who are hungry for the bread of truth; to be messengers of God's love. We are called to make the daily effort and sacrifices that are needed in order for His kingdom to come, and His will to be done here on earth.

This Advent, as we look forward to Christ's coming, let us resolve to do as he commanded us, so that when he comes, we may greet him joyfully as faithful servants, having gratefully received his gifts and generously shared them with our brothers and sisters.

First Week of Advent

Thursday 7 December 2023

First Reading: Isaiah 26:1-6; Psalm: Psalms 117: 1, 8-9, 19-21, 25-27;

Gospel: Matthew 7: 21, 24-27

The readings today have a poignant nature and can but only prompt profound reflection on the mass scale of devastation and consequent loss of lives in the Turkey-Syria earthquake in February this year; the later earthquake in Morocco and the devastating floods in Libya. The scenes of houses collapsing or being washed away do not fit easily with today's readings at first glance. Yet in reading Isaiah we are given the confidence to delve far deeper than the physical appearance of structure with an affirmation that God makes salvation its walls and ramparts.

God is our rock and similarly we endeavour to provide that steadfast security for those whom we meet throughout our journey in life, not by empty promises and empty words but by our continual desire to reflect the image of God in whom we are all made. Our foundation is the Imago Dei and in responding to that inner presence of God we have the opportunity to provide a structure of strength to others who unexpectedly experience devastating distress. The wise person is the person who takes these opportunities and turns them into the loving action of a missionary disciple in the reassuring knowledge that they themselves are held securely in the loving embrace of our Trinitarian God.

Life cannot always glow with sunshine and warmth and there are times when turbulence becomes a more prominent feature. However, our roots cannot be swept away with the cycle of life for they are embedded in the Gospel of Christ and our own profound desire to do the will of our Father whose love endures forever. Nevertheless, our faith can be challenged by the traumatic devastation we often witness from a local and global perspective, and it is at these times we need to draw upon the wisdom of generations past as we too declare that we trust in the Lord for He is the rock eternal. We are given the privilege to pray for all those whose faith is challenged in times of fear and physical devastation that they will trust in God and be comforted by His people who as missionary disciples of Christ themselves gain strength through sacrament and prayer.

In a world of instability we strive to be that solid foundation in the comforting reassurance that amid the turbulence of life our faith is an unyielding structure built upon truth.

Reflection written by: Trisha Tindall, St Mary's, Forest Hall

First Week of Advent

Friday 8 December 2023

First Reading: Genesis 3:9-15, 20 Psalm: Psalms 97:1-4;

Second Reading: Ephesians 1:3-6,11-12; Gospel: Luke 1:26-38

Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Patron of the Diocese

His Reign Will Have No End

Many of us will have been lucky enough to have visited Lourdes and seen the statue of Our Lady which stands on a plinth in the niche of the grotto where the young Bernadette Soubirous witnessed the apparitions in 1858. Carved on the plinth are the words Our Lady spoke to Bernadette, "Que soy era immaculada concepciou", in English, "I am the Immaculate Conception". From the beginning of her life, Mary had a purity and a holiness that was unknown since the Garden of Eden. Only her totally sinless being was a fitting environment for the Son of God in his becoming human.

As today's second reading reminds us, we have all been called by God to share his infinite love and blessings, long before we were born. This is especially true of Mary who was chosen from all humankind by God to be the Mother of his Son, the Mother of the Church, and our mother.

The whole biblical story of salvation in Christ depends on Mary's story, beginning with today's account of the Annunciation. Everything Jesus has done for us depends on what Mary has done. At the Annunciation, Mary stands before God on behalf of the whole of humanity. By saying 'Yes' to God, she allowed the work of our salvation to be fulfilled.

When we pray the Hail Mary we echo the words addressed to her by the Angel. Let us pray that we, too, will be filled with the grace and courage to say a resounding and unconditional 'Yes' to all that God wants from us. Let us also be reminded that we have all been called by God to know, love, and to serve Him.

Our devotion to Mary is only right and proper, but the focus is always on Jesus. Let us ask Mary to help us to love Jesus as she did, from this moment of Annunciation in Nazareth, through the pain of the Cross, to the joy of the Resurrection.

Reflection written by: Jem Wynne, Holy Name Parish, Jesmond

First Week of Advent

Saturday 9 December 2023

First Reading: Isaiah 30:19-21, 23-26; Psalm: Psalms 146:1-6;

Gospel: Matthew 9:35-10:1, 6-8

When Jesus saw the crowds, he was filled with compassion for them. The people were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Jesus saw the needs of the people and commissioned the disciples, giving them authority to reach out to the needy both spiritually and physically.

That call is given to us too. Jesus gives us the same authority that he gave the disciples. We are called to show God's love to the people we meet daily. Those who seemed to be "lost without a shepherd", the lonely, the heartbroken, the homeless, the mentally troubled and physically ill etc. We are called to reach out to these people and show them that "the kingdom of God is at hand." They need not be the "lost sheep". God is at hand, if we respond to Jesus' call and show his love to the people we meet.

My parents were sat in their front room discussing the severe housing difficulties in Croydon with members of their family. The statement was made "well you do something about it", they saw this as a major prompt from God, so they did! The Catholic Housing Aid was formed, later changed to the Croydon Housing Aid, and through this, hundreds of people were able to find housing in the town. The charity created flats with low rents so that families could save so they had the deposit for a mortgage. Later they worked in London with SHAC helping with the housing situation in London. All it took was a few people to respond with compassion to God's call and move with his authority.

What is the Lord asking us to do today and tomorrow to show people that the "kingdom of God is at hand"? "The harvest is plenty, but the workers are few".

Reflection written by: Gerry Connor, St Augustine's Parish, Darlington

Second Week of Advent

Sunday 10 December 2023

First Reading: Isaiah 40:1-5, 9-11; Psalm: Psalms 84:9-14;

Second Reading: Second Peter 3:8-14; Gospel: Mark 1:1-8

A Messenger for Christ? If not, why not?

You may have reflected on "the importance of John the Baptist as a Messenger". Recall that Jesus was already present in our world, growing up and moving around amongst his people during John's mission period. However, many people did not know him (John 1:26), still others were in doubt. So John, in essence, acted as an ambassador for this Messiah. One of the qualities of an ambassador is the ability to pull people in and make them as excited as him/herself about the person/thing being represented. Hence, John not only touched people's hearts - persuading them to repentance and baptism, but also made Jesus so convincingly known that some disciples started running after Jesus instead.

How about you and I today? I do think that similar scenario of John's time abounds in our present society. As faithful people, we believe that Jesus is alive and with us always. Still, many out there don't know him and others are seeking to hear (more) the Good-news. Like John, we can become the VOICE crying out, pointing to the Lord in our today. Remember, we are all called to spread the gospel to the ends of the earth. How can YOU become that VOICE in your own circumstance? It could be reaching out to family members, friends, neighbours, groups and initiating a Good-news conversation.

I'm often challenged by the amount of evangelism carried out by the Street Preachers - their boldness, humility, with humiliations and other risks involved. Their VOICES on the city-squares have given many the opportunity to, at least, hear the name "Jesus Christ" and/or to listen to His Words. Some other brave individuals I know have opted to speak to at least one-person-a-day about faith in Jesus Christ during their mutual conversations. The Holy Father encourages us to go out there and share our faith. Let's pray this Advent that we make conscious efforts to become the VOICE crying not just in the wilderness but anywhere there is opportunity. Be open to willingness to take the first step on faith-actions matters, then the Holy Spirit will accomplish the rest as He pleases. Blessings to all as we journey together.

**Reflection written by: Sr Paschaline Okolo,
Our Lady Immaculate & St Cuthbert, Crook**

Second Week of Advent

Monday 11 December 2023

First Reading: Isaiah 35:1-10; Psalm: Psalms 84:9-14;

Gospel: Luke 5:17-26

In this Gospel we are greeted with the slightly odd picture of the paralytic man whose friends lower him through a roof as Jesus speaks in a crowded house. Picture the scene, Jesus focused on preaching and from above a man being stretchered in through the roof. Then there was Jesus's response. "Friend your sins are forgiven."

Many people have felt drawn to Jesus. Hoping to find compassion, forgiveness, a light to show us the path, but maybe most of all, to find belonging and love.

We are all parts of the Catholic community. Loved by Jesus. Having faith in the Lord. But even as part of this community we can sometimes be quick to judge others. We are asked to remember that we are all made in the image of God and are perfect even in our imperfections. Forgiving others of their mistakes can sometimes seem like an unreachable task, but we are called to follow in the footsteps of Jesus.

In the passage Jesus shows not only his authority to forgive sins, but his values and priorities. He feels that forgiveness is the priority, which will in turn result in the paralysed man walking again.

How might you allow others to break free of their own disabilities by your own forgiveness? Building bridges with those in your community and reaching out with love can have a lifechanging impact, just as it has in this gospel passage. This Gospel asks us to reflect on our interaction with others, our ability to forgive, and reminds us that Jesus is indeed the resurrected Saviour Lord of the world.

Second Week of Advent

Tuesday 12 December 2023

First Reading: Isaiah 40:1-11; Psalm: Psalms 95:1-3, 10-13;

Gospel: Matthew 18:12-14

My pupils at St Aidan's and St Anthony's schools were given the same day, the 12th of December, to record an Advent video reflection for YMT. Would you say the Holy Spirit was at work here?

I've enjoyed talking to them about the Gospel reading. They felt the Gospel was reminding us of God's love and commitment to everyone. A reminder that although we stray at times, God is always bringing us back to live in communion with Him. The pupils also felt that the Gospel calls us to action. Through His life and resurrection Jesus reminded us that He wants his people to be united as everyone is equally precious to Him. He shows us the way He wants us to be, and we can find all life giving instructions in the Gospels.

The theme of the second week of Advent is Peace. In the Old Testament, peace means shalom, its meaning is complete, whole. In the New Testament Jesus' birth is described as Eirene, the Greek word for peace. Jesus came to bring peace among us.

The Old and New Testament contain the same message of peace. We read the scripture like so many generations before us to discover the same message: to be one community as the people of God. We are reminded that even if one of us is lost, only one, the community is incomplete, God wants us all.

It is our mission to live in union with our sisters and brothers.

I look at our parish and school flock and see so many different people. Some are easy to love while others, well, after all, it is a 'field hospital'. I stop myself and recite the words: 'It is never the will of your Father in Heaven that one of these little ones should be lost.'

Ok, God, I hear you.

My mission of looking after all my precious and beautifully made sisters and brothers goes on. Everyone, in wholeness with God. Not a single person left behind.

**Reflection written by: Kasia Szczepanska, School Chaplain,
St Aidan's and St Anthony's Catholic Academies**

Second Week of Advent

Wednesday 13 December 2023

First Reading: Isaiah 40:25-31; Psalm: Psalms 102: 1-4, 8, 10;

Gospel: Matthew 11:28-30

What's the heaviest weight we carry in our lives?

The shopping bags in one trip from the car?

The child we carry for 9 months before birth and then after into young childhood?

Or the weight of the stresses and troubles in our life and the world around us?

When we have a literal weight to carry like the shopping from the car, or a tired child growing heavy in our arms, if we can't manage we ask for help from those around us, those we love.

We share the burden.

When it comes to our stresses and troubles we often make ourselves deal with this weight alone until it reaches a limit that we can no longer cope. But, this is not what is meant for us when things get heavy and hard to handle. This is when we're invited to turn to God with our prayers; to pray and converse, to pray out the stresses and struggles of work, pray away the worries of children at school, pray to lighten the worry of a poorly relative, pray for others, even those you have not met yet.

Praying is our own way to help the weight we carry on our shoulder float away like a balloon on a cloudless day.

God is always listening and with prayer he rewards us with rest, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest."

So as we journey through this Advent season, open your heart to God. We often see people at this time laden down with shopping; let's help ourselves, and them, by lightening the load we all carry in our hearts and on our shoulders.

God Bless and Merry Christmas to you all.

Reflection written by: Laura Young, St John Boste, Washington

Second Week of Advent

Thursday 14 December 2023

First Reading: Isaiah 41:13-20; Psalm: Psalms 144: 1, 9-13;

Gospel: Matthew 11:11-15

In today's Gospel, we hear Jesus talking to the crowd about John the Baptist at a time when John is imprisoned. Jesus explains that John is a prophet yes, but much more than that. The line before this Gospel section reads: 'Look, I am going to send my messenger before you; he will prepare the way before you.' Here, Jesus is quoting the prophet Malachi (Mal 3:1), meaning 'messenger'. This is the final book of the prophetic books in the Old Testament in the Catholic Canon of the Bible and is also the final book before the New Testament begins.

John the Baptist is the fulfilment of Malachi's prophecy, he is indeed the messenger sent to prepare the way for the coming of Jesus. In this Gospel piece, Jesus does not shy away from the fact that John's message was not necessarily met with positivity. His message was not readily accepted by the people listening, so much so that John ended up arrested and imprisoned because of it. What is this saying to us during this Advent season?

First of all, we should reflect on preparation; it is the season of Advent after all! Just as John prepares a way for Jesus to come into the world, we must also make this way and give space for Jesus in our own lives.

Secondly, note the contrast in how John is described by Jesus. First of all, he is described as the greatest 'of all the children born of women' (Matt 11:11). And 'yet!', Jesus says, 'the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he is.' It seems that Jesus compliments John only to bring him right back down to earth. I think this is perhaps the second thing we need to reflect on, the fact that everything we have is a gift from God and we should be humble with regards to this. We can be great prophets, thinkers and workers for Christ but sometimes we can get lost in the building up of ourselves. We need to remember that he is at the centre of it all and that as well as our talents and treasures being used for the good of him, they also come from him. We should always seek to be humble when preparing the way for him.

Reflection written by: Rebecca Leighton,

Lay Catholic Chaplain to the University of Sunderland

Second Week of Advent

Friday 15 December 2023

First Reading: Isaiah 48:17-19; Psalm 1:1-4 6;

Gospel Matthew 11 :16-19

It isn't always easy to find a link between the Gospel of the day with the First Reading and the Psalm, but today we hear echoes in each. We hear words of blessing and also of warning and a timely reminder to "pay attention". In this time of preparation for the birth of Jesus, we are invited to reflect on our own lives and the choices we make. Today's readings are pointers for us in "preparing the way of the Lord."

The prophet Isaiah offers words of comfort as he refers to the words of the Lord, "I your God, teach you what is best for you; I lead you in the way you must go." This is countered with a warning, "Had you paid attention to my commandments, your peace would have been like a river, your righteousness like the waves of the sea." Similarly, the Psalmist presents us with the way of fruitfulness and happiness on the one hand, "Blessed is the one who finds delight in the law of the Lord." and "He is like a tree beside a brook producing fruit in due season." and on the other, "But it is different with the wicked, they are like chaff driven away by the wind, they will not stand when judgement comes."

The culmination of blessing and warning comes in today's Gospel, and unlike Isaiah and the Psalmist, the strong words of warning come first, "What description can I find for this generation?" words of exasperation directed to those who would not listen to the life-giving messages offered by John the Baptist and Jesus himself. All they can do is criticise and grumble. They do not heed the invitation. However, we are assured that ultimately goodness will prevail and "wisdom has been proved right by her actions".

The blessings and the warnings are as significant for our time as they were so long ago. We are living in extremely turbulent and troubled times and the "the way of the Lord" is often difficult to detect. Let us try in our own lives to continue to listen and act in God's name and to encourage others to do the same.

Reflection written by: Chris Smith, St Robert's, Morpeth

Second Week of Advent

Saturday 16 December 2023

First Reading: Ecclesiasticus 48:1-4, 9-12; Psalm: Psalms 79:2-3, 15-16, 18-19;

Gospel: Matthew 17:10-13

In the last two verses of the Old Testament Malachi prophesies that Elijah will appear before the promised Messiah. In Matthew's Gospel (written over 400 years later) Jesus acknowledges that John the Baptist came in the spirit and mould of Elijah, just as was foretold.

The apostles needed help to recognise a true prophet in their midst and sometimes we too need help in discerning what is true and in recognising the needs of people today.

The word of God is rich and deep in meaning and has a timeless message. Matthew wrote this at a troubled time in their history and we are all aware of what troubled times we live in both here and across the world.

Just as John and Jesus were not accepted and were ill-treated by their own people, to how many people does that apply today? So many people are in dire financial need due to the increased cost of living, so many are homeless, hungry and cold. Where do we start to help them? What can we personally do? Upon reading and reflecting on Matthew's Gospel, this was the abiding message I was left with.

Where and how do I start to help? What can I personally do to love my neighbour as Jesus asked? Difficult questions as we are all facing financial hardship. It would be wonderful if we could help financially but there are so many other ways too. Kindness, a smile, reaching out, a helping hand, a listening ear and giving of our time can all show that we care. In our busy lives how easy it is to forget the importance of small acts of generosity.

In God's eyes we are all equal, but sadly, this is not the view of so many. Greed, violence and hatred are all so evident in our world today.

We pray that we may be bearers of the truth this Advent and that we will give to others the hope that they might need in their lives at this time.

Reflection written by: Leonie Ducker, St Joseph's, Blaydon

Third Week of Advent

Sunday 17 December 2023

First Reading: Isaiah 61:1-2, 10-11; Psalm: Luke 1:46-50, 53-54;

Second Reading: First Thessalonians 5:16-24; Gospel: John 1:6-8, 19-28

All the mentions of John the Baptist in the Gospels paint a picture of a really striking character – intense, focussed and probably rather forbidding. Gospel accounts of him, preaching in the wilderness, state that his clothes were of camel hair, and he ate a diet of locusts and wild honey. Yet we are told that people still flocked to hear him, to confess their sins and to be baptised in the Jordan.

Today's gospel tells us that he certainly generated plenty of popular interest and notoriety. Deputations from the authorities came to try to pin down exactly who he was and what he was about. It wasn't just an academic point: it was generally believed at the time that Elijah had not died, and would return to earth to announce the end times, so it was an important and topical issue to identify exactly who John claimed to be.

The emissaries must have been apprehensive about what kind of response they would get – John had previously referred to the Pharisees and Sadducees as a “brood of vipers”. They wouldn't have been looking forward to an easy encounter.

John's response is direct. If we had to summarise it in just a few words it would be – “... It's not about me....look towards Jesus..” He points to Jesus as the saviour. He says his own role is negligible in comparison. It is the very opposite of selfishness and introspection.

Some would say that many lives today are blighted by selfishness and introspection. So many modern influences turn our thoughts inwards towards ourselves, or encourage us to compare ourselves to others. John's message, from two thousand years ago, is the antidote: “...it's not about me ...look towards Jesus...”

Selfishness and introspection diminish us. The philosopher John Ruskin said: When a man is wrapped up in himself, he makes a pretty small package. The Christian answer is to look outwards, towards Jesus, and towards others. Perhaps as Christmas approaches, we can make a special effort to reach out to those who are less fortunate, or lonely, to help in some way to bring God's love into their lives.

Reflection written by: Tim Fetherston, Our Lady of Mercy Parish, Sunderland

Third Week of Advent

Monday 18 December 2023

First Reading: Jeremiah 23:5-8; Psalm: Psalms 71:1-2, 12-13, 18-19;

Gospel: Matthew 1: 18-24

We know so little about Joseph in the scriptures, yet he is there as a constant, benign presence supporting and loving his special son. As a young child, I had a picture book containing an illustration which still, so many years later, is clear in my mind. It showed a carpenter's workshop with the figures of Joseph and Jesus working with tools and at a lathe. The reality of Jesus's childhood came over strongly. How lovingly Joseph brought up his charge and how readily we can be drawn to him as a powerful figure of devotion.

The opening sentence of this passage catches my attention, arrests me. It is a statement so simple, so direct. We have read earlier of Joseph's descent from the line of David and understand how much he must have valued living according to the law and his reputation as an upright man. I am struck by how devastating Mary's pregnancy must have been for him. Before the eyes of the law, he is betrothed to marry and yet he is now faced with the situation of public shame and personal emotional betrayal. Yet how kind he is. How generous. How empathetic in his attitude to Mary. She must not suffer shame.

And then the dream. The Angel comforts him and Joseph responds to its extraordinary message. I am inspired by how he responds in faith and with a mind fully open to the divine. He accepts God's plan for him although he cannot yet understand what it will mean. Gone now are his concerns about his social situation. We see Joseph responding in trust and faith to the message he is given, and yet it must have been bewildering. I am given a lesson in listening with an open heart, believing and obeying. And perhaps letting go of my fear.

Third Week of Advent

Tuesday 19 December 2023

First Reading: Judges 13:2-7, 24-25; Psalm: Psalms 70:3-6, 16-17;

Gospel: Luke 1:5-25

Names are important – they enable us to recognise, converse with and relate to each other. How many times have I forgotten somebody's name – especially when they are standing in front of me – and I feel embarrassed not so much by a lapse in memory as by a failure in graciousness towards the one with whom I am talking?

Today's verses from the book of Judges have an angel appearing to a woman and announcing that her days of being barren are over. It is a remarkable episode, yet both the angel and the woman remain nameless. Today's passage from Luke's gospel begins with the names and the heritage of both Zechariah and Elizabeth. Each is of a Hebrew priestly family, worthy in the sight of God and a blessing to each other, yet each also has a hidden and painful longing for a child. During a time of prayer, carried to God on clouds of incense, an angel announces that their days of longing are over and, when Zechariah cannot believe it, the angel discloses their own name, Gabriel.

Names are indeed important, and in the Scriptures they have meaning. Zechariah's name can be translated as "The Lord God remembers", Elizabeth's as "God's oath (or promise)". New parents often select their child's name with care, drawing upon their family heritage in making their choice. In today's gospel, however, the name of John is itself a gift of God, revealing something of the giver, for it means "God is gracious". God is indeed gracious, remembering us in mercy, being faithful to his promise and calling us all by name, a name he can never forget.

In both readings today, God is fruitful and surprising but the greatest source of amazement for us is the movement from anonymity towards intimacy between the divine, the angelic and the human. Each knows the other's name which, if we ponder it deeply, should render us speechless with awe.

And yet, the story is not complete. In today's readings we hear of two annunciations, tomorrow we shall hear of another, one that outshines them both.

Reflection written by: Andy Doyle, St Cuthbert's, Durham

Third Week of Advent

Wednesday 20 December 2023

First Reading: Isaiah 7:10-14; Psalm: Psalms 23:1-6;

Gospel: Luke 1:26-38

Today's gospel is so well known I felt apprehensive about saying anything about it. However, I offer my observations, appreciating that people may just want to reflect on the encounter themselves. Mary makes three responses to what happens. Firstly, she is disturbed when the angel Gabriel greets her by name and wonders what it means. God also calls me by name. Do I respond to that calling seriously enough to be disturbed out of my complacency and to consider what that means for me?

Mary hears life changing news from Gabriel and rightly asks how this can be since her personal circumstances would make his prophecy impossible. When I am faced with apparently impossible tasks, options or dilemmas do I ask God for help? Mary didn't say 'no' but 'how'. When we are faced with insuperable burdens, it's tempting to walk away from God and to say no. Like Mary, we can ask for God's grace to help us to work through our difficulties, our suffering and our pain.

Gabriel explains how God's plan will come about, reassuring her that 'nothing is impossible to God.' Mary responds with humility and love, 'I am the handmaid of the Lord.' She doesn't question or doubt but places herself completely in the Lord's hands; she is his handmaid, not a reluctant slave forced to do his will but a willing servant who is acting out of love. Mary ends by saying, 'let what you have said be done to me.' Thus God became incarnate and revealed to us what he is like in the person of his son, Jesus. Now Jesus is with God until he comes again to earth. He is present on earth in us, as members of his church, the body of Christ. It is through that body that God now works, through you and me. Can I echo Mary and answer, when God calls me by name, let what you have said be done through me. Mary, fully aware of the impossible nature of what God was asking of her, said yes. Can I do the same?

Reflection written by: Janet Wallbank, St Teresa's, Heaton

Third Week of Advent

Thursday 21 December 2023

First Reading: Songs 2:8-14 or Zephaniah 3:14-18; Psalm: Psalms 32:2-3, 11-12, 20-21;

Gospel: Luke 1:39-45

A woman, past middle age, gazes from her window, deep in prayer, in the garden her husband is working the soil, his voice is silent, down the lane comes a tired young woman, it has been a long climb from Nazareth to the hill country of Judah, and she carries a heavy burden.

The older woman looks up and sees the other, she cries with joy, and the babe in her womb leaps up in greeting. She rushes to the door, flings it wide, and Mary enters.

The world turns on this meeting, two women, cousins, one young, one old, both filled with the joy of a child growing within, coming together to share a moment never to be repeated in humanity's story.

When I was young, I struggled with the image of Mary, the Mother of God. I cannot explain this, I said her prayers, I sang her hymns of praise, but, somehow, I could not reconcile her status to my understanding of my faith in her Son.

When I was older, I mentioned my dilemma with Our Lady to a friend and she told me to look more closely. It was really the first time I had looked for her. She moved from the background into a clearer light, and I realised that she was the pathway to My Lord, Jesus. Now she is so important to me that I cannot understand why I ever failed to see her.

The importance of the Visitation Story is not just the meeting of Elizabeth and Mary but the very human experience of two women suddenly filled with a unique relationship with God. Through them, we too can have a personal encounter with Jesus, Our Saviour. Our Lady is the first of the Apostles, she asks us to listen to Him and follow Him, wherever He may lead us.

Third Week of Advent

Friday 22 December 2023

First Reading: Samuel 1:24-28; Psalm: First Samuel 2:1, 4-8;

Gospel: Luke 1:46-56

It's Christmas once more, or rather it will be soon. Advent is rushing to its end and in two days we will be celebrating the birth of "Babe Jesus". *If* we are lucky, the air will be filled with the laughter of loved ones and the smell of turkey. Many of us have already gathered to sing our favourite Advent and Christmas Carols. In the midst of all the warmth and joyful noise of Christmas, it is easy to forget...*Christmas*.

It's Christmas once more, and yet, again, the Holy Land is the theatre of the kind of fratricidal bloodshed which we hoped was behind us. It's Christmas once more, and Ukrainians are still fighting for their freedom and survival. It's Christmas once more, and the number of people falling into poverty in our country continues to grow. It's Christmas once more and yet, when so many of our brothers and sisters are being unjustly and heavily burdened, we may find it difficult, perhaps impossible, to find cause to rejoice. In the midst of this never ending bleak mid-winter of our world, it is easy to forget...Christmas.

Today's readings remind us *who* it is that Christmas celebrates: a just God who has come to dwell among us to restore God's creation. The psalmist tells us that in this God, "the bow of the mighty is overcome, and the weak are girt with strength". With this God, the impossible becomes possible - "the barren hath borne many". Today's Gospel very much echoes the promises of the Psalm. It tells us more about this God-made-flesh who is the God of the poor and the lowly, a God utterly alien to the logic and "order" of our world, a God who sides with those whose names are forgotten, whose stomachs are empty, and whose lives are broken by the greed of others.

Perhaps this bleak mid-winter is a unique place to pray and shout, in the cold night, in our churches, in our hearts, "O come, Emmanuel, come hastily".

Perhaps there is ground to hope and rejoice indeed, for God is to make all things new!

Reflection written by: Gael Pardoen, St Cuthbert's, Durham

Third Week of Advent

Saturday 23 December 2023

First Reading: Malachi 3:1-4, 23-24; Psalm: Psalms 24: 4-5, 8-9, 10, 14;

Gospel: Luke 1:57-66

God promised to send a messenger to prepare a way for the Lord and to make his paths straight. The conception and birth of John the Baptist were decisive stages in the fulfilment of that promise. The uniqueness of the name given to John was a clear indication that he had a special mission.

God is calling us individually and as a church community today to engage in the same mission carried out by John the Baptist as forerunner of Christ. We are God's chosen instruments. We are called to bring this good news to our neighbours, our friends, families, colleagues, to all near and far.

In the face of all the conflicts, disasters and insecurity being witnessed today in different regions and countries, the world today is longing for God's intervention. Just as the message announced by John brought hope and joyful expectation, our world today is yearning for inspired messengers of the Good News who would bring renewed hope to wounded humanity. That is our mission as Christians called to make Christ present in the world.

For many whose faith has grown lukewarm on account of betrayal, disappointment, bereavement or suffering, God appears to be distant and disconnected. To such people, the sense of expectation that characterises the season of Advent ought to bring renewed hope of restoration. And God counts on us to be messengers of that renewed hope. We are called to reach out and touch others, not necessarily by doing extraordinary things but by simple acts of love that radiate the beauty of the gospel.

May the birth of John the Baptist help us to be true heralds of the Lord's coming. May God who made man, our master who taught us how to be humble by his birth, help us to live for God and humanity through our actions.

As we prepare physically and spiritually during this Advent season for the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, may we appreciate the magnitude of this great mercy. May we gladly celebrate this great season with dedication and resolution. May Christ's birth bring us healing, hope, comfort and the reason to live, especially in this time of great hardship and challenges across the globe.

Reflection written by: Ngozi Chukwu, St Joseph's, Gateshead

Fourth Week of Advent

Sunday 24 December 2023

First Reading: Second Samuel 7:1-5, 8-12,14, 16; Psalm: Psalms 88:2-5, 27, 29;

Second Reading: Romans 16:25-27; Gospel: Luke 1:26-38

What do you think of when you think about the Virgin Mary? A saintly woman who is the mother of God, the mother of our Church and an inspirational role-model to us all? She is without doubt a truly inspirational person. But for me, I think what makes her extraordinary is her absolute ordinariness.

Mary was from a town where literally nobody expected her to amount to anything. Imagine the dodgiest place you can think of. That's pretty much the type of place Mary grew up in. A humble girl, aged around 13-14 years old, from a very underprivileged and dangerous background with little chance in life. Yet when God sends his angel down from heaven to deliver this life-changing news she has the courage, the strength and the devotion to say 'Yes. I am the Lord's servant'.

As a secondary school teacher I couldn't imagine the fear that she must have overcome having a baby at that age. Mary could even have been stoned to death under ancient Jewish law for being pregnant before marriage in those days, but this ordinary girl steps up to the challenge and embraces this most monumental mission with love, great courage and passion. So today, let us pray too that when God comes calling, we can be a little bit more like Mary and embrace God's call with an unequivocal 'yes'.

When I read this Gospel reading, I couldn't help bop along to the hymn 'Here I am Lord'. God has a plan for us all, no matter where we are from, what we have done, who we are. If we love Jesus, let us open our hearts, let his love in and let's say 'YES' to His amazing call for us all.

Amen, God bless and have a cracking Christmas!

Fourth Week of Advent

Monday 25th December 2023

First Reading: Isaiah 9:1-7; Psalm: Psalms 95:1-3, 11-13; Second Reading: titus2:11-14;

Gospel: Luke 2:1-14

The Nativity of the Lord

Sisters and Brothers, may I wish you a very holy and a very peaceful Christmas. Our Saviour is born for us anew. Jesus enters our everyday lives to share in our joys and to share in our brokenness too. If Christmas Day finds us joyful, enjoy it with the Lord. If there is any sadness, then rest assured that is where we will find the healing presence of Jesus. Offer it to the Lord and the Holy Family in prayer.

We can feel that we must be prepared perfectly to welcome the Lord. It is good if we are, and we have spent Advent listening to readings inviting us to stand ready. But we should never forget the First Christmas finds a family unprepared, far from home, with just a stable to offer their newborn. Jesus is used to us not being perfectly ready. He is not going to be offended. He is born for us no matter our readiness. All he wants from us is what Mary and Joseph could offer, their love, their care, their hearts and minds in service of Him. We offer the Lord what we can.

In one of my parishes where I served, we had a beautiful large nativity scene. The Baby Jesus looked a bit too well developed to be newborn, as they always do, but His arms were outstretched as if he was saying pick me up. I loved the image as Jesus wants us to pick Him up and take Him home into our hearts and minds and everyday life. Needless to say, one Christmas there was much merriment as an excited young pre-school girl did pick Him up and attempted a dash up the Church. Out of the mouths and actions of babes come spiritual truths. Let us take Jesus home into our hearts and minds.

Our Midnight Mass Gospel ends with the heavenly host of Angels singing "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and peace to men who enjoy his favour." Their song of joy will continue throughout the Christmas season until it ends with the Baptism of the Lord on Sunday 8th January. Let their joy be our joy. God is with us, Emmanuel. The God who created all that exists, including you and me, comes to us to share in our lives, to walk alongside us. It is a scandal that our all-powerful God does not appear as mighty and invulnerable. No, our Saviour is revealed as a babe in arms, born into poverty and soon to be a refugee from

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appalling violence. So yes, let us enjoy our Christmas traditions, our families and friends, our food and drink and our gifts but please, please do not forget that we meet our Saviour born for us in those who will go without, those who today will be homeless, those who flee for their lives. May we be charitable and loving to those who today and everyday will struggle.

A blessed Christmas to you all.

+ Stephen



**Reflection written by: The Right Reverend Stephen Wright,
Bishop of Hexham and Newcastle**

Blue Christmas Resources


Christmas can be a difficult time for many people for all sorts of reasons – bereavement, unemployment, being far away from family – and so on. A Blue Christmas liturgy offers a way of acknowledging that – and, hopefully, finding the hope that will help them to get through Christmas.

On the diocesan website (<https://bit.ly/DHNAAdvent>), there are three liturgies that can be used by an individual or within a group.

Cloth for the Cradle – takes the idea of having strips of cloth on which then form part of a “blanket” into which the Christ-child image can be laid – in amongst the sorrows of life that he came into the world to be part of.

Kindling Lights of Hope – reminds us that God created light and walks with us through the dark times in our lives.

Palm of God's Hand – focusing on the reading from Isaiah 49 where God speaks of his tenderness for his people – whose names are written on the palm of his hand.



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With sincere thanks to everyone who has contributed to these wonderful Reflections throughout the Season of Advent.

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