

THE SECOND WEEK IN ADVENT

- Sunday** **The Second Sunday of Advent**
Dec. 4 **Recognizing What We Can Hope For**
A reflection inspired by a text of Sr. Dianne Bergant
- Mon** **Monday of the Second Week of Advent**
5 **Turning to God Now**
A reflection developed from a sermon by St. Augustine of Hippo
- Tues** **Tuesday of the Second Week of Advent**
6 **Repentance is a Matter of Deeds**
A reflection by Chiara Lubich, founder of the Focolare Movement
- Wed** **Memorial of St. Ambrose of Milan**
7 **Opening Ourselves to God's Wisdom**
A reflection developed from a commentary on the psalms by St. Ambrose of Milan
- Thurs** **The Immaculate Conception of the Virgin Mary**
8 **Learning to Obey God**
A reflection inspired by a text from Fr. Carroll Stuhlmueller
- Fri** **Friday of the Second Week of Advent**
9 **Daily Living the Feast of the Immaculate Conception**
A reflection developed from a text by Fr. Hugo Rahner
- Sat** **Saturday of the Second Week of Advent**
10 **Beating Swords into Ploughshares**
A reflection extracted from a sermon by Aelred of Rievaulx

.....

.....

.....

Recognizing What We Can Hope For

A reflection inspired by a text of Sr. Dianne Bergant

What do you think of when you hear Isaiah's vision of absolute peace—of lions and lambs living peacefully together and children playing safely on the holes where poisonous snakes live? Is this something you hope for? The question really makes no sense because Isaiah asks us to imagine what life would be like if all living creatures lived in a God-centered relation to one another. He is asking us how we imagine living a wholly God-centered life.

God has created all things. All living things live and prosper through their relationships with one another. According to God's intention these relations are to be life-giving and not death-dealing. Isaiah's message is that if we want a good life we have to find a way to establish life-giving relationships with everything in our world. He declares this will make our relationship with God the determinant of how we relate to every other person and thing.

In the light of Isaiah's proclamation—and remember that he speaks "God's word" and not just a personal message—what are we doing as we prepare for Christmas? We are preparing to welcome God among us. Jesus is Emmanuel and that means "God with us", literally. Jesus is our opportunity to let God be the center and lynch pin of our lives! Jesus will show us how to make our relationship with all other beings life-giving and not death-dealing. He does this by example.

What do all Jesus' signs, what we think of as miracles, do? They show that trusting in God gives life and a better life to all who put their trust in God. How do they do it? They trust in Jesus—God among us! The message is that we have a stupendous opportunity to trust wholly in our God because, if we do, we will become life-giving for all others. We can become what Jesus was for those who encountered him.

Are you ready to believe this literally? Are you ready to hope that what Jesus does and teaches is actually true? Recall the Acts of the Apostles and the marvels done by apostles acting out this belief and trust. In each situation ask: How can I make this life-giving? We need to act out (not just think or imagine) Jesus' promises as true. That is how we are to prepare for and live Christmas. It is a first fulfillment of the hope and promise of Christmas—for us and those who encounter us. We don't get to tell God how to act through us. We only get to try to be life-giving for others—to all we meet no matter how wretched or off-putting they seem. Don't be afraid! Your faith will save! That's what Jesus constantly says. By our refusal to act do we make him a liar?

Turning to God Now!

A reflection developed from a sermon by St. Augustine

The Gospel tells us that Jesus rebuked people for learning to predict the weather so well but never bothering to learn how to tell when the time had come to live wholly by faith. They believed that God would come to judge and would set all things right, and they were very much interested in knowing what the visible sign of this coming would be. Jesus replied, “You can’t expect to see the Kingdom of God coming; the Kingdom of Heaven is within you!” This is repeated in the Gospels because it applies to us too!

John the Baptist and Jesus both began their preaching with the message: “Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand!” This repentance is a change in one’s way of thinking about the world and one’s life, a way of appraising what the changes going on mean or will lead to. The call is to turn to God and make God the center of all one’s thinking and acting. Each of us would be wise to take the advice of our Teacher and not waste the present time. It is now that the Savior offers us mercy. Now, while God still spares our race, because God doesn’t want anyone damned, we must repent.

Being concerned about the “end of the world” is a waste of time. That is God’s concern. For us it is time to live by faith! Whether any of us will be alive to witness the world’s end I don’t know, but I doubt it. Yet I know that the time for us to go to God is near. We are mortal! We think of objects made of glass as fragile but we are even more fragile. If you put a glass object in a protected place it never changes but we change—we get sick and we grow old and can’t be kept safe from this indefinitely, like a glass figurine.

Due to our weaknesses we are haunted by fears. Think of all the calamities that befall people so regularly. If no such thing overtakes us time will still march on. We can evade accidents and misfortunes but they are only dangers from without. We can’t escape dangers from within, like old age and sickness. Suddenly some illness will fall on us. Besides, even if we are spared that, old age will come inevitably.

What is the lesson? This is the time to turn to God with all your heart and in everything you do. Look at yourself! What are the signs that the Lord is coming? So pay attention to changes in yourself as well as in the world around you, and turn to the Lord today!

Repentance is a Matter of Deeds

A reflection developed from a text by Chiara Lubich, founder of Focolare

“Repent, for the Kingdom of God is close at hand.” The conversion called for consists in a 180 degree turn, a complete reversal of one’s lifestyle. It makes God’s Word the criterion of what words and deeds are good or bad.

The great sin into which Pharisees and Sadducees fell was that of not letting God have his rightful place at the center of life. Their interpretations of God’s will were more important than anything else. Ritual ablutions, Temple sacrifice, observance of the Sabbath, etc. were more important than what God had literally asked of them. God wanted love and service of others. The will of God, as Jesus emphasized, means “bearing fruit that is worthy of the repentance one professes.

We often remark that people want to eliminate God from their lives as though God were superfluous or useless. People want to rely on science or technology and its progress. Won’t these increase our ability to reach a resolution of all our problems and make ourselves self-sufficient? We think of this and call people to accept God into their lives and we forget about our own need to do the same thing.

We Christians often enough try to evade God. We reduce our Christianity to outward observances and traditions but without feeling a personal need to live all the commandments fully. We evade God by not bothering to learn how to draw the concrete consequences of faith in God for our daily life. We evade God by not loving neighbor practically in ways that are within our reach and capacity.

What shall we do to put the Word of Life into practice personally? Start by looking truthfully at where you stand before Jesus. Have we, for instance, excluded loving as he loves from our practical lives?

It is certain that our wounded world can only be healed by Jesus! But Jesus requires that we let him heal it in and through our lives and deeds. He calls on us to let him live in us, actually and practically. The Gospel cannot be lived cheaply or in a watered down version. But on the positive side, if we let Jesus live in us then we experience Jesus’ transforming power. That is what it means to repent and be converted. Are we letting this happen, or not?

Opening Ourselves to God's Wisdom

A reflection developed from a Psalm Commentary by St. Ambrose

The Lord Jesus is Divine Wisdom given to us to be our wisdom. Our first parents rejected God's wisdom in favor of that of Satan. That was the wisdom they made their own. May the study of wisdom ever be in our hearts and may we speak of it continually. Let our tongue speak of justice and of the Law of God. Speaking of the Great Commandment as the symbol of all God teaches us, Scripture says: "*Speak of these words at home and abroad, whether you are busy or at rest*". What does this mean? It means that we are to speak of the Lord Jesus who is the Word of God and God's wisdom.

Scripture also says, "*Open your mouth to God's Word*", spread this word and meditate on it. When we speak of God's wisdom Jesus is present; when we speak of the virtues that come from God Jesus is present; when we talk of peace and of life and of redemption Jesus is present. Of course, we can't do this unless we have opened ourselves to receive these gifts. Scripture says, "Open your mouth wide and I will fill it". Not all can understand what God gives them well but the spirit of wisdom is poured out into everyone in accord with each one's capacity to receive it. You have received it, and so have opened yourself to the Lord Jesus. Now meditate on Him, speak of Him, and seek to understand what He asks of you.

We are to meditate when we are "at home". This means that when we are quietly present to our inmost self we think thoughtfully in order to avoid sinning when later we speak and act. Speak to yourself as to a judge then you will be able to speak in public and will speak of Christ. Speak to yourself and speak to Christ and do it always. You need never be unoccupied. God says to us through St. Paul, "*It is my wish that in every place you shall offer prayers with blameless hands held aloft and be free from anger and dissension*". This is the best sort of speech and it prevents the sleep of spiritual death from ever surprising us unprepared. When you rise from ordinary sleep you can speak to Christ. Listen to Him knocking at the door of your heart?

As in the Song of Songs, he says "*Open to me, my beloved!*" Every time is a time for arousing this love. Love is Christ. He teaches us that love which is Divine Wisdom and which reshapes our lives so that we no longer live but have Christ living within and in and through us. Isn't it now the hour to wake from sleep? Isn't this an acceptable time for us to turn wholly to the Lord? Open your heart and self to receive this marvelous gift.

Learning to Obey God

A reflection inspired by a text of Fr. Carrol Stuhlmueller

Every year when we celebrate Mary's Immaculate Conception the readings at the Eucharist contrast Eve as disobeying God with Mary's total obedience. To learn from this we have to remember that everyone must face the same test as our first parents: Will we take it upon ourselves to decide what to treat as good and bad or will we look to God and God's Word when deciding? Do you believe that God actually will help you make good decisions? Eve didn't believe but Mary did.

Mary is asked to bear a son who will be God's Messiah. So she pauses and asks, "What will this require of me?" Eve was asked to believe that deciding for herself what to consider good or bad was itself not a good thing. She didn't ask anyone to help her make the decision, and the text goes out of its way to say that Adam was with her. Nor did he ask her to pause before she went ahead and did what both had been told was wrong. What about you and me? Do we obey, or disobey, without asking for help in making that decision?

Mary asked for help, and got it. The angel told her all she had to do was let God make her pregnant without any human intervention! She replied, "If that's what God wants then that's what I want." even though she could foresee some of the consequences that would make her life difficult. The story about Joseph and his decision shows us some of them. Eve evidently didn't think much about consequences and the story shows how her decision set her and Adam against one another, changed her self-perception (i.e., she had to do something about their nakedness), and changed her relation with God.

What about you and me? In Scripture we are given many commands from God. Do we, like Mary, ask what each one means practically? Do we consult with others when we can't answer this question on our own? Isn't that why we are told to study Scripture so carefully and consistently and use the resources of the Church? Isn't this more important for us than the urgencies and emergencies of our daily tasks? It isn't just a matter of shutting up and doing what one is told.

We are told, "Love others as Jesus loves them", and it's certainly not clear how we can do this through our daily tasks, let alone how to do it in extraordinary circumstances. Advent is about preparing for the coming of God's Word, and so about preparing to do God's word. Do we prepare like Mary? Are we as serious about it as Mary was? Only if we seek out whatever help we need to learn what God's word requires of us are we serious about obedience.

Living the Immaculate Conception Daily

A reflection developed from a text by Fr. Hugo Rahner

Humanity seems to be standing always at the outer edge of its paradise lost. To learn from this we are told we must contemplate the figures of Eve and Mary. That is, we must contemplate not only the beginning of God's work of creation and re-creation but the Church as foreshadowed in Mary. When we do it we find the word 'immaculate' both sums up God's work and the task that is our spiritual life.

Our life with and in God is a life in the Church and that means it begins with Mary, Immaculate by the power of the Spirit and the cleansing power of the sacrifice of her Son. We, in our turn, must become immaculate by the power of the Spirit and the Blood of Jesus. We must become what our first parents originally were by winning the victory over the serpent and its temptation. We are called to enter once again into the paradise from which we were exclude by becoming, to quote from the Letter of Jude, "spotless" (im-maculate) before the presence of God's glory.

Being immaculate, for Mary and for us, depends on the redeeming blood of God's and Mary's Son. St. Paul never tires of reminding us that "Christ has reconciled us in the body of His flesh through death, to present us as holy and unspotted and blameless before God". God has made this choice eternally and so forgiven the sins of the world. He "by the Holy Spirit offered himself unspotted unto God". And the eternal God also eternally saw that this should be accomplished through the obedience of an unspotted daughter of Eve.

The children of Eve were by God's design to seek always to crush the head of the serpent who taught them to sin. They were to continually try to stamp out evil. But only Jesus Christ could do this. In him we, imitating Mary, can do the same. We crush the serpent's head when we follow Mary in obedience as Eve followed the serpent in disobedience. What began in Mary is fulfilled in the Church, and so in us. No wonder we celebrate the Immaculate Conception of Mary as one of the greatest Christian feasts. We are celebrating a feast of our own personal sanctification. How so? We do this as we continue to consecrate our lives to God by obedience to the Word, by a kind of immaculate intention. We seek always to discover how to obey so that God's will and grace may save the world from itself and its darkness. Each day each of us sets out anew to accept the grace of allowing God to accomplish this by every thought and deed.

Beating Swords in Ploughshares

A reflection taken from a sermon by Aelred of Rievaulx

Do not be afraid for I proclaim good news to you. There is being born in you the Savior of the World—Christ the Lord. An edict has been issued that the whole world should be registered. The officials entrusted with the task are the apostles and holy preachers whose utterance has gone forth to the ends of the earth. They are to register all as citizens of the Holy City, the Jerusalem on high. All over the world people race to be registered and to return to God the coin that is their souls imprinted with the divine image.

Although we are all making our way to this city we are not all in it nor do all of us keep watch over ourselves. There are many ways of life by which people seek this city. All need a way that will protect them so that they may guard themselves from sin and vice. So let's take a look at ourselves and our city. We are surrounded on all sides by sound observances which rise up like walls to prevent the enemy from deceiving us and enticing us away. What a wall poverty is! How well it defends us against pride and superfluities. What a tower silence is! It repels contentions, quarreling and distraction. What about obedience, humility, cheap clothing, a restricted diet? When we make profession of this way of life the words of Isaiah are fulfilled: They shall beat their swords into ploughshares and never again train for war.

Don't you see people who are great in the world laying down the equivalent of swords of power to earn their food by manual labor like the lowliest people? Wrongdoing is a sword and by it one wounds oneself as well as others. As the Lord said, "Everyone who takes up the sword will perish by the sword". How many beat this sword into the ploughshare of compunction. Many change the spears of sharp wit and sharper words into tools to help others reap a spiritual harvest.

The herald angels of the Lord's birth did well to call us to joy. The joy of salvation is true joy. But you welcome them. You stay awake in the night watches and avoid all the works of darkness. You stay alert to make all you do pleasing to God, especially by good thoughts and words and deeds. Do you understand the words "Don't be afraid"? They console us because we are called to love and that casts out fear. We live in a strong city where we learn day by day to love more purely and more truly. We need only trust in our Lord.