

THE FIRST WEEK OF ADVENT

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WAITING IS CONVERSION TO THE LORD

A reflection by Blessed Gueric of Igny

We are waiting for the Savior. Waiting like this is truly a joy, at least for the righteous. They wait for the fulfillment of their hope of blessedness. They look forward to the coming of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ. The righteous may ask themselves, What am I waiting for? Their answer is, I am waiting for the Lord! And when they say this they turn toward the Lord in prayer and confess: “I know that you will not disappoint me after such a wait!”

They can say this because by their very prayer they are with God and our Savior. Besides, we are with Jesus by our very human nature. He took it upon himself and has offered it, on our behalf, to the Heavenly Father. Now our nature is glorified and is with God. That gives us hope because we know all that is human will come to God. We are the members of Christ and we must follow our head. Isn't that what we wait for?

But one can wait for the Lord most trustfully if one's conscience is at rest. We want to pray to the Lord: “Every smallest possession of mine is entirely yours”! Have you treasured up in Heaven all your powers, either by giving them to the Lord or by renouncing them for the Lord's sake? At Jesus' feet have you laid down all that is yours, knowing that you cannot keep it safe but that he can? He will restore to us all that is really ours and multiply it a hundred-fold, adding to it the gift of eternal life. This is what we wait for.

How blessed are you if you are poor in spirit and only lay up for yourself treasures in Heaven. The Lord himself says that where our treasure is there is our heart. So, we must let our hearts go to God, and then our treasure will be with God where our hearts are. Let's fix our hearts on high and rest all our expectancy in the Lord. Our abiding place is in Heave. It is from there that we await the coming of our Savior! That is what we wait and hope for.

O hope of all peoples! No one who waits for you will be disappointed. All the righteous from the beginning of the world have hoped in you! They have now received mercy and cry out, “Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!” With them we have trustfully turned to the Lord, and the Lord has turned toward us! “Look, here is our God!” We have been relying on God and God will save us.

Our eyes are fixed with joyful longing on Heaven. Some are impatient but they can't find what they seek among merely earthly things. Blessed are they whose hope rests in the Lord's name. Such a person knows that it is better to become humble with the meek than to share wealth with the proud. The Lord is our share, and so we wait for the Lord. Does it seem that the Lord delays coming? Thea God does this in order to be merciful to us and call us to repentance. So, if you are wise consider how you are using the present time of waiting. It is given you so you can turn again and again to God and so to live in that love which isn't separable from holiness. This holiness, above all, is what we wait for.

OUR GOD TEACHES US GENTLENESS

A reflection by Rev. James Kirk

All through Advent we hear a great deal from Isaiah. This Sunday we heard from Third Isaiah, a prophet speaking to those who had suffered the loss of all they had and were exiled. Now had been led back to Israel and face the task of building a new life, and it must be different from the previous one. The prophet tells them not to attempt to control things but to gently cultivate God's actual gifts, like one cultivates land. It is a relationship that God has given. It is also a time to learn how to cultivate mutual respect and understanding. Isaiah's is a pastoral vision.

All are called to build a community that is eager to know God's will and do it. God's plan is that we flourish and become able to share good with others. What steps need to be taken for this to happen? We must not try to force everyone and everything to fit into some scheme or pattern we have imagined, thinking it will make life what we want it to be. But what does God want it to be? We are to learn to cultivate gently what God has given us, not only in fact but in hope. Basically that is the only way we can have an abundant life. God doesn't overpower us or force us. God calls us gently and asks us to do the same for one another.

Throughout our days can't we watch for occasions when we can cultivate relationships, recognizing that we can't make good things happen by controlling or dominating? This difference this approach makes becomes obvious in its results. Recall the Lord's saying: By your fruits you will know them.

It may be that cultivation of relationships requires reconciliation. This amounts to cultivating a Christ-like way of viewing others and what they have or are doing. It draws us to seek and then cultivate new insights into one another and how each views and deals with life and its challenges.

Third Isaiah's ultimate vision was of Zion as a place for what we call mountain top experiences. He sees all peoples being drawn to Zion as the Lord's chosen dwelling place, the place where God will reveal to all a way to peace and plenty. He sees this new order of things coming to all through the faith of Israel. It includes a new way for Israel to relate to the Gentile world, and it will lead that world to relate to Israel in a new way. All will learn to walk by God's spirit.

That means seeing self and one's life in a new way. After all, the old ways haven't brought the good life they were supposed to bring. Everyone was trying to get control and they simply frustrated each other. Now we can turn to the Lord and learn to gently cultivate what God has actually given us—in giving us a place to live and a community with which to live and to work at helping all open themselves to share the good that comes only from God.

GOD'S WAY OF TEACHING US

A reflection taken from a sermon by St. Augustine

“Stay awake! You never know when the Lord will come!” The coming of Christ, the Lord, was silent and took place in obscurity. We look forward to a coming that will be public, unmistakable and unavoidable. We look forward to his coming as a judge to set all things right and give all what their deeds have deserved. But we have to pay more attention to what he has actually done among us before we try to translate our faith into a way of life.

Jesus did not come as a judge but came silently and as one who was to be judged. “He was like a sheep led to the slaughter, like a lamb before its shearers. He didn’t open his mouth.” Knowing how he actually behaved why do we imagine that he will come again and behave in an entirely different way? We imagine him as a judge who is anything but silent or submissive.

Today, when a preacher speaks of divine commands, quite a few sneer or jeer. What they don’t see is what God promises. To judge people is not only to punish but to fulfill promises. Today God doesn’t openly punish and so many laugh at God’s commands. Today God doesn’t seem to fulfill the promises made by the prophets and many think they are empty and will never be fulfilled. After all, both good and bad people enjoy the same sort of happiness, if they are happy at all. This world’s blessings and sufferings are experienced by all no matter if their lives seem good or bad. Seeing no evidence that anyone is being called to account many hold God’s promises in derision.

Still, each of us would do well to think of judgement even now, of the fact that God, when it is the proper time, will judge. Why does God act as he does? Surely if he never passed judgement when he lived our life he will not suddenly begin to do so. It is clear that God takes no pleasure in condemning. God’s desire is to save. He bears patiently with us in order to cultivate the good in each and all. Yet we have a warning from St. Paul: “The wrath of God will be revealed from heaven, and God will reward each one according to that one’s deeds”.

What is God’s wrath? It is God destroying what is evil so that good may flourish. Does evil abide and endure, even now? No, it perishes. In spite of all human power and ingenuity can accomplish, no evil way of life long endures. We cannot set up an order that perpetuates injustice endlessly. Even now to do evil is to set oneself on a path that leads to the destruction of all you have tried to build and preserve. As Scripture say, “Don’t you know that the patience of God is meant to lead you to repentance? God has come among us in gentleness to call us to turn to what is good and can last. God calls us to learn to take delight in the good. It is the only way we can walk toward genuine and lasting happiness. We are now in a time for learning to recognize and delight in the good. God shows us in Jesus what is good and how to do good to one another. Let’s give ourselves to learning from Jesus and to walking in his footsteps.

WHAT CAN WE HOPE FOR?

A reflection by Fr. Carroll Stuhlmueller

Advent speaks to us in the language of hope. It calls upon us to ask seriously what our hopes actually are. It calls us to look at our ways of living and so of using the gifts we have for the realization of a hope which can last and can bring good to us and to those we love and want to share life with?

Hopes can be dangerous. The ways we select in order to realize our hopes can prove destructive. The frustration of one's hopes can lead people to suicide and all sorts of harmful behavior. But hope can also turn a sinner into a saint. That is what we want to have happen to us.

St. Paul brought a new way of life to an entire community in Corinth. But they weren't content with what they had received. Many wanted something more so they could stand out even in their community. Listen to Paul's reaction. "*If I have the gift of prophecy and comprehend all mysteries, if I have faith great enough to move mountains, but have no love, I am nothing*". The situation reminds us of an ancient proverb: The result of corrupting what is best results is what us worst. What is the best? It is the love with which Christ has loved us all, and which he wants to teach us all so we can love others with him.

Advent is intended to remind us of the goodness beneath even the people who most annoy us. It gives us second chances to restore or revive what seemed lost. Nothing is more lost than a relationship with someone whom we have criticized sarcastically. Yet in Christ's love, Christ's way of loving, we find a hope for restoring even such ruined relationships.

This kind of renewal is not easily accomplished. Isaiah gives us a prayer that can provide guidance. "*You, Lord, are our Father. Why do you let us wander from your ways and harden our hearts? O that you would rend the heavens and come down!*" God has rent the heavens and has come down. Jesus has come to us and taught us all we need to know to find a new life that requires nothing more to bring us to happiness than God has given us. But we have to follow Jesus' example.

The most powerful source of genuine hope is prayer. But trusting in prayer requires what we call "waiting on the Lord". This kind of waiting doesn't require that we stop and do nothing. The servants the master, in Jesus' parable, put in charge of his household while he was away had to work hard—at caring for one another and not focusing their attention on what they were getting out of it. The Lord sends blessing unexpectedly and beyond our hopes or control. The great task is to trust in the Lord.

ABIDING IN THE LOVE OF CHRIST

A reflection from “On Virginity” by St. Ambrose

You are one of God’s people. You belong to God’s family. God has chosen you to be his own. You are as close to Christ as one of your bodily members is to you yourself. God has given you grace and you are beautiful in God’s eyes. What should you do to rest in the love of Christ that drew you to give yourself to him in those early days of your love for your Lord and of your awareness of his love for you?

Let the light of your grace of body and spirit shine out. Let the splendor God has given you be seen by all. When you are in your room at night you think on Christ and you long for his coming at every moment. But this is not something you can only do when alone. Think of the person Christ has loved in loving you. Be that person fully and always. Let yourself be attentive to the Lord’s word. Follow carefully the path God’s providence has given you to walk. Do not be negligent or lukewarm in giving yourself to your Lord and lover in all you do.

The bride in the Song of Songs says, “I sought him but I didn’t find him; I called him and he didn’t hear me!” Are you not in his presence because you have displeased him? No. He constantly allows our love for him to be tested. If it seems to you that he has left, then go seek him. Seek him with your love.

The Holy Church can teach us how to hold fast to Christ. You have already been taught all you need to know. If you want to hold fast to Christ you must be prepared to follow him wherever he goes. You can only do this if you hold on to Christ by the bonds of love, by spiritual bonds. Suppose you face suffering. You must be fearless in clinging to Christ in the very midst of suffering. It is often easier to find him in the midst of such torments, whoever causes them.

In a brief moment, when you have escaped from the powers of this world without yielding to them, Christ will come to you. Christ will not allow you to be tested for long. Whoever seeks Christ in this way finds him. You will hold fast to him in the secret places of your heart.

What you seek is that your heart become his house, his abiding place. So what you have to do is keep this house spotless. Sweep out its secret recesses until it is wholly immaculate and beautiful. It is then a spiritual temple in which God’s holy, high priest offers spiritual sacrifice. Christ is the cornerstone, of his body the Church and of the holy house that is the heart of each of his members. The Holy Spirit dwells in you, making all you are and do a gift for your lover Lord.

Whoever seeks Christ in these ways, whoever prays to Christ in these ways, is never abandoned by Christ. Quite the contrary, Christ comes to such a person again and again. He delights to visit your house more than that of Lazarus and Martha and Mary. Christ constantly raises you up to new life, a life you will have with him even beyond the end of the world. Never let go of the hope that he is.

IMMACULATE OBEDIENCE

A reflection by Fr. Carroll Stuhlmueller

The saving message of our celebration of Mary's Immaculate Conception is about obedience to God's will. There is nothing more purifying than obedience like that of the Virgin Mary. God wanted to share goodness with us. When we refused he did not give up. Why? It is because God has to be obedient to himself—that means to the goodness that urges him to share goodness. Not only was the Son to live among us but was even to be a member of our family. We were to be drawn into the life and hope and goodness of Jesus so completely as to share Jesus' own divine nature. God adopts us as children so as to share every good with us. We only have to obey, to trust that following his will does lead to such a sharing.

Think of the fact that God's will can be compared with the compelling demands that goodness makes on a good person. An honest person can't help but speak the truth. A generous person is perpetually giving gifts. God lives under the same sort of determination to give because this expresses the intimate divine life by which God is God. God has to be obedient to who God is, and had to before the world began. Such obedience is the inner, non-negotiable determination of God to be completely who God is.

Because we were created according to such a will our nature is continually summoning us to an ideal far higher than we could reach or understand. We are always feeling summoned beyond our best ideas of ourselves. There is always a temptation to settle for something good but less. That's the story of Eve's fall. What God's obedient love means for human life is revealed to us in the Gospel stories about Mary and Joseph.

The angel told Mary what God willed for her. She asked how it could really happen and was simply told that God would make it happen. Her response was obedience. Let it happen just as you have said! About the same thing happened to Joseph when an angel came to him in a dream. He discarded his plans and obeyed God. This obedience characterized both Mary and Jesus. She conceived and Jesus died according to God's will and plan. To know God's will was to obey—or so it was for them. That is immaculate obedience. What about us?

Advent is not simply a preparation for Jesus birth. It is a training in immaculate obedience. We celebrate this feast to remind ourselves of God's eternal goodness as the root and source of our lives. Like Mary we are capitulating to a taskmaster but to the expectation that we will become who we truly are at the root of ourselves. We are good. We embody a marvelous goodness beyond anything we ordinarily are willing to believe. Like Mary we are challenged to believe that God will make it so because God has called us to share the divine nature and its way of living. And victory is assured in Jesus the Christ.

OUR HOPE FOR THINGS UNSEEN

A reflection from “The Benefit of Patience” by St. Cyprian

Our Lord has told us a great truth: “*The one who endures to the end will be saved. If you are faithful to my word you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth and the truth will free you.*” The hope for truth and freedom is given us. We only need to persevere in following Christ by our living to see that hope made real and be shown to be true. The very fact that we are Christians provides the grounds for that hope, but to see it fulfilled we must have patience!

Our goal is not present glory. It is a glory that is to come and is quite unlike any glory on earth. St. Paul reminds us that “*we live in the hope that we have been saved, but if this salvation were already in sight there would be no need to hope for it*”. Patient waiting is necessary if we are to attain the full stature of the persons God has called us to become. In God’s own time, at the exactly right moment, we will achieve all that we are invited to hope for and wait for patiently.

St. Paul talks about this in a different letter than the one just quoted and uses the analogy of earning interest on an investment. “*While there is still time, let us do good to all, especially to those who belong to the household of faith. We must not grow tired of doing good for in due time we shall reap a harvest on our investment.*” Our investment is our trust in God’s promises. In action it is patience.

This is Paul’s way of encouraging us not to lose patience. Temptations lead us toward what is much less than God’s promise. One of the temptations most difficult to resist is that of stopping in mid-course in our journey toward glory. To make a good beginning and then to fail to complete the journey would be terrible. We are called to a kind of perfection we haven’t yet imagined we are capable of. Don’t give up hope until God has brought you to the fullness of his gifts.

We may not realize how charity is bound up with patience and endurance. As Paul tells us, “*Charity is magnanimous and kind, it doesn’t envy and isn’t boastful and it isn’t easily provoked to anger. It thinks no evil of others and loves all things, believes all things, hopes for all things, endures all things*”. What we are called to wait for with patience is the flowering of charity in our living.

As we are told in yet another Scripture. “*Bear with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit by the peace that binds us together*”. So, we are shown that neither peace nor unity will be preserved unless we care for one another with mutual forbearance, preserving the bond of peace by means of patience. How could we not persevere when the hope is for such a marvelous good. And all of this is given us in Jesus Christ!