

THE THIRD WEEK OF ADVENT

- Sun.** **The Third Sunday of Advent**
Dec.16 **WHAT ARE WE PREPARING FOR?**
A reflection taken from Origen's Commentary on Luke
- Mon.** **Late Advent Monday: O Wisdom**
17 **OUR CONTINUALLY SURPASSED EXPECTATIONS**
A reflection developed from a text of Carroll Stuhlmueller
- Tues.** **Late Advent Tuesday: O Adonai**
18 **GOD BRING RIGHT OUT OF WRONG**
A reflection developed from a text by Carroll Stuhlmueller
- Wed.** **Late Advent Wednesday: O Root of Jesse**
19 **HOPING AGAINST HOPE**
A reflection developed from a text by Carroll Stuhlmueller
- Thurs.** **Late Advent Thursday: O Key of David**
20 **A CHRISTIAN'S COMPASSION**
A reflection from a sermon by St. Gregory Nazianzen
- Fri.** **Late Advent Friday: O Orient**
21 **THE GIFT THAT IS PRAYER**
A reflection from Tertullian's Treatise on Prayer
- Sat.** **Late Advent Saturday: O King of Nations**
22 **GIVING THE GIFTS OF CHRISTMAS**
A reflection from a sermon by St. Bede the Venerable

WHAT ARE WE PREPARING FOR?

A reflection from Origen's Commentary on Luke

John the Baptizer made it clear that he was not the fulfillment of Israel's hope; John had been sent by God to prepare the Chosen People for something new. He pointed this out by telling us that he only baptized with water, but of the one who was to follow him in leading us to God he said, "*He holds a winnowing fan in his hand and will use it to clear his threshing floor; the wheat he will gather into his barn but the chaff he will burn with a fire that can never be put out*". What does this mean? Why does our Lord hold a winnowing fan and what sort of wind does he use to separate the wheat from the chaff?

Imagine that all of us Christians are like a heap of unsifted grain and the wind that is going to separate wheat from chaff is temptation. You may recall the words God spoke to Job: "*Do you think I had any other purpose in speaking to you than to reveal your virtue?*" In another text God says: "*I humbled you and made you feel the pangs of hunger to reveal what was in your heart*". If a person is overcome by a temptation it wasn't the temptation that made that person chaff. No, that person was already chaff; the temptation simply disclosed the fact.

Our Lord's coming is a powerful call to turn to God. When trials and temptations come you can endure them bravely and faithfully. In that case the trial merely brings to light the hidden virtues of patience and courage that were already in you. If you prove fickle and faithless, then what you were already is made obvious. Recall the Lord's parable about the house built on rock or on sand. A storm won't let a house stand firm if it has no firm foundation. If you set out to build one you put it on a foundation of rock so that no storm will destroy your handiwork. If your house collapses when a storm comes that simply proves it wasn't solidly founded.

When you enjoy a quiet time, when no storm is raging within or without, before the rain squalls begin and the waves swell, that is the time to focus all your efforts on the foundations of the life you are constructing by your works and efforts. We need to build with many overlapping bricks, bound together with the mortar of the Spirit's fire of love. The bricks are God's commands and counsels. If, with God's grace, you build well, then a time of persecution won't destroy you. A persecution feels like a tornado or hurricane beating on your house. When this happens does it reveal that you have built a life founded on Christ, our rock?

What could be worse than to deny Christ when you are persecuted for belonging to the Church or when you experience a great temptation! But if you find yourself failing, remember that the falling away didn't begin when you began to suffer trials and persecution. The seeds and roots were in you long before and the trial only brings this to light. That is why we have to prepare for the Lord's coming by prayer and works of love. Jesus, like John the Baptizer, doesn't ask us to leave our ordinary occupation or life but to live it solely for God and in accord with God's commands. Begin now, because storms will come and your work will be tested.

OUR CONTINUALLY SURPASSED EXPECTATIONS

A reflection developed from a text by Fr. Carroll Stuhlmüller

For a long time, the Church has provided special liturgical guidance as we prepare for Christ's renewed and deepened coming into our lives. The symbol of this is what we call an "O Antiphon". Today's is the first. At Vespers Mary's song, the Magnificat, will be introduced by the words "O wisdom...". Oh, how marvelous is the wisdom of our God, because the gifts given us always surpass our expectations! In Christ, God's promise to care for us, and all God's chosen ones, is fulfilled, but it isn't exhausted! That means our expectations are always too limited to encompass God's plan of salvation.

Israel, for instance, after it passed through the political crisis which led to the creation of kingship under David and his descendants, tended to think that all there was to God's promise of salvation was economic prosperity and political-social independence under a Davidic king. Christ is a Davidic king, but not at all in the way people expected. We have accepted that, but we still can't imagine what God actually has in store for us.

Suppose we have to face a crisis like Israel's Babylonian exile; i.e., suppose the way of life we think of as leading us to God becomes impossible. What new form of life will God lead us to? We don't know; and God doesn't tell us. We have to wait upon the working of God's Providence. Our understanding of Scriptures, and of God's promises contained in them, may be correct but it is never exhaustive—we never see the whole plan of God or how it will be fulfilled.

When we prepare for the coming of Christ, we are opening our hearts wide enough to accept whatever may be in store for us. We find a reminder of what this means in the genealogies of Jesus, Mary and Joseph. They contain individuals who didn't belong to the Chosen People, who were polytheists, prostitutes, blood-stained oppressors of their own people and so on and on. This is a warning that we will come into possession of the entirety of God's promises by receiving strangers and foreigners, even people with no good reputation. We will have to open our lives, and even our homes, to people we fear or distrust. If we act selfishly or treat others with indifference, fear, or by putting distance between us and them, we will lose even what we try desperately to preserve and even be driven away from what we thought were fulfillments of God's promises.

Crises like these demand that we step out of what is comfortable and into something new and even scary that comes unannounced into our lives. We are being prepared to recognize in such things God's loving hand and God's face in the people who may seem just the opposite of Jesus. But God is in all these, even as he was in and with all those generations of events and people we hear about in the Scriptural genealogies. Are you willing to let such things happen and even see them as God's will leading us to love and joy? This is what it means to welcome God's wisdom.

GOD BRINGS RIGHT OUT OF WRONG

A reflection developed from a text by Fr. Carroll Stuhlmueller

The O Antiphon for today proclaims “*The Lord is our Justice*”. Justice consists concretely in right relationships. Yet the fact is that those God has called to be his own often don’t maintain a right relationship with their Lord. That was true of most of the kings Isaiah and Jeremiah had to work with in trying to call Israel to a right relation with its God. Many were weaklings, some were vicious and oppressive, some were polytheists or apostates, and most relied on human rather than divine wisdom to guide their actions. What is a person to do in what seem impossible circumstances? Isaiah and Jeremiah found that they just had to trust in God to set things right. Nothing they could say or do had proven effective.

A like situation faced Joseph in his relation to Mary. They were betrothed and now Mary was pregnant, but not from Joseph. He wanted to trust Mary but he couldn’t see that he had any choice but to divorce her. And suddenly he dreams that an angel is telling him to take her into his home as though nothing improper had happened. He is being told that God has made the impossible happen and he should accept this. That’s what God has constantly done in the age-long Plan to draw all people to accept him as their only God and guide. They can’t trust ordinary human standards any more than we can; we have to be God’s instruments in leading others to worship and love one God only. That’s true of accepting ourselves as really God’s chosen instrument. Do we have the faith to see God in ourselves, in spite of our faulty relationship with God and with others? You too have a prophetic vocation! Are you ready to act it out, but in the way and circumstances God arranges and not judging by human wisdom? Do you believe that all things are possible for God?

When we prepare to celebrate God’s fulfillment of the promises made to Israel, and to us, we have to realize that putting our hope in God means hoping in these promises even when they seem humanly impossible. We celebrate a pregnant virgin who has gotten pregnant without intercourse. We celebrate a Davidic king whose kingdom is not from this world or its ways and wisdom. We celebrate people who have no special insight into God’s ways and we have to accept and cooperate with them without such understanding.

We have to make decisions to trust when there seems no good reason to do that. When we celebrate all this, we implicitly accept God’s call to us to act as his prophets did, and as Joseph and Mary did. We celebrate the divine grace that makes such things possible—even in us. Our limitations, imperfections and weaknesses and sins don’t make this impossible. Our Lord is justice and makes relationships right in spite of all the ways we do or don’t cooperate. Can you believe this is something to celebrate!? Doing so is just, a right relationship with God and God’s Plan for salvation.

HOPING AGAINST HOPE

A reflection developed from a text by Fr. Carroll Stuhlmueller

The expression “hoping against hope” means that one goes on hoping even though ordinary ways of deciding what can be hoped for reasonably tell us there is no hope; we hope contrary to ordinary human ways of hoping! Today’s O Antiphon reminds us that this is precisely what Elizabeth and Zachariah, and Joseph and Mary, had to do. Everyone knows that women who haven’t been able to conceive before menopause don’t become able to after menopause. But that is what is promised to Zechariah and Elizabeth. Everybody also knows that the Davidic line of kings wasn’t revived and didn’t actually regain rule over Israel, yet here is a pregnant virgin who believed she would have a son who would do just that. What outlandish hopes! Are you prepared to believe that something equally impossible, but wonderfully good, will happen to our world through God’s grace working in you?

The stump of the Davidic family—and that’s all that was left of it—was going to put out a shoot that would grow into a Kingdom which, in the words of the Book of Daniel, would fill all the world. That is your actual hope! What’s more this isn’t going to happen because God will work an obvious miracle. God is going to bring this about through people who are as unable to accomplish this wonder by their own powers as a post-menopausal woman or virgins who doesn’t have sex are able to get pregnant! We are faced with a situation in which the Church has lost credibility as a guide for people’s living and hoping, and yet through us and people like us God is going to change that—but not in any way human wisdom or planning could expect or bring about.

To celebrate Christmas is to hope for this sort of thing, against all ordinary reasons for hope. We are never asked to betray our human intelligence or throw away our ancestral store of wisdom or established ways of deciding what is and isn’t prudent. God probably isn’t going to do a miracle that will overwhelm all unbelief—as he told those of his own day who kept asking for just this. But God will do amazing things through us and people like us! The miracles God works are done through ordinary people of faith. God, so to speak, hides from sight by working in and through such people.

That’s what God did in and through Jesus. He always says that it is faith that does wonders and not Jesus alone. So, we are challenged to believe and hope, and see wonders done! At some moment God will call us to do something that calls for “heroic faith”. At that moment we must simply trust in God. That’s what Mary did. That’s what Joseph did. That’s what Elizabeth did, even when her husband wouldn’t believe. “Come, Lord Jesus, flower of Jesse’s stump, and bring life where it seems dead. Come, and revive my life and faith in your presence in me and my life. Make me a sign of how one can live trusting entirely for you.” Are we willing to hope for this, even against all normal standards of where there is and isn’t hope? Isn’t that the gift God wants to give you this Christmas?

A CHRISTIAN'S COMPASSION

A reflection from a sermon by St. Gregory Nazianzen

The coming of Christ is the most compassionate deed this world will ever see. It is not, however, a single deed, nor one done at only a single moment or period of history. If my words can convince you of this—you servants and siblings and joint-heirs of Christ, then while we have the opportunity let's visit Christ, care for him, feed and clothe him, give him hospitality and cherish him. How can we do this? Christ has told us. What we do to any one of Christ's brethren we do to Christ, from the moment of his birth on.

Scripture says: "*Blessed are the merciful for they shall receive mercy*". And another reads: "*Blessed is the one who cares for the poor*". Yet another, "*The good are moved by pity to be generous; good people are ready to lend all day long*". Let's lay hold of these great blessings and be known for understanding, kindness and compassion.

Even nighttime shouldn't interrupt your works of mercy. We should never say, "*Come back later and I will give you something*." Good intentions are to be carried out right away. Kindness needs no second thoughts. "*Share your bread with the poor and open your door to the homeless*"; do this with good will. "*If you give charity give it cheerfully*." Willingness doubles the effect of good deeds.

So then, let's go about doing good in a joyful spirit, in a Christmas spirit, and not with a woeful expression. How else can one act out one's charity if one is not to be mean or suspicious? Should charity be filled with doubts or grumbling? Give as God has given to us. "*Then our light will break forth like the dawn and soon we shall grow healthy like one newly healed*". Light and healing are what all long for and are gifts Christ brings. Using them is the only way to accept them!

We don't feed Christ with a single meal, as Pharisees sometimes did. We don't give him perfumes like Mary. We don't provide him with a new and unused tomb like Joseph of Arimathea. We don't give him burial spices like Nicodemus. Nor are we asked to produce the gold, incense and myrrh that the Eastern sages brought to Bethlehem. The Lord of nations asks mercy rather than sacrifice.

Scripture tells us that pity is worth more than any holocaust of fattened lambs. We offer Christ our compassion by caring for him in the destitute and the marginalized. We don't cling to anything of this world; we look in hope to eternity and to being with the Lord, our Christ, forever. That is the fulfillment of the mercy that we celebrate as Christmas. Let's live being merciful as Christ is.

THE GIFT THAT IS PRAYER

A reflection from Tertullian's Treatise on Prayer

Once the commonest form of worshipping God was sacrifice. But our God doesn't ask this sort of worship. Scripture says, "*What is this profusion of sacrifices to me? I have had a surfeit of burnt offerings of rams and I have no desire for the fat of lambs or the blood of bulls and goats. Who demanded these things from you?*" What our God does ask is told us by Christ: "*The hour is coming when true worshippers will worship the Heavenly Father in spirit and in truth; for God is Spirit and the worshippers God speaks must be like him*".

By God's gift in Christ, we are God's true worshippers; we are true priests; we offer a sacrifice of prayer and we offer it in the Spirit. It is a sacrifice worthy of God and most acceptable. After all, it is what God has asked for, and God has made it possible for us. This, then, is what we are to bring to God.

Such an offering should be dedicated to God with one's whole heart. To do this our heart has to be nurtured by faith and prepared by truth. It needs to be unblemished in innocence and chastity, and, most of all, it needs to be garlanded with love.

This is why we always try to accompany prayer with psalms and hymns and even the procession we call good works. Do you doubt that God will turn away such an offering, or will fail to give us all that we truly need and ask for?

Prayer made in spirit and truth is the best of offerings to God. It is love and trust in God. What's more, it more bears fruit in the form of love and care for others, especially those for whom we pray. If we pray sincerely for another's well-being and if we ask that God send that person help, we have already been sent and responded first by our prayers. We have begun to help and we simply need to continue what we have begun in whatever way is possible.

How many stories have you heard about the effectiveness of prayer? Isn't Scripture filled with tales about the wonders done in response to prayer? Is God less caring or less merciful now than in other times? If we trust in God, and in prayer to God, we have already received the grace of enduring the crosses that we must bear. Again, by uniting us with Christ's sufferings it shows us that our own suffering has meaning, and a redemptive meaning.

It is Christ's will that prayer should never lead to any hurt inflicted on others, no matter if they have hurt us. The power of prayer is always a power for being good and doing good. For Christ it was a power of bringing life to the dead, healing to the crippled, freedom from demons and freedom for innocent captives. It cleanses us from sin, foils temptation, strengthens the faint-hearted, gives joy to the generous, feeds the poor, guides the rich to help others, and preserves those who stand their ground for the cause of right.

By Christ's grace your prayers can be means for accomplishing these and all sorts of other good things. What better way to celebrate the coming of Christ our savior than imitating his prayer? Prayer for others makes us more like Christ. Can't our example as well as our prayers be marvelous gifts? Let us give these gifts more than all others!

GIVING THE GIFTS OF CHRISTMAS

A reflection from a homily by St. Bede the Venerable

The gift of Christ, and of all that we have received and become through Christ, comes as a gift from all those listed in the Gospel genealogies. This is summed up and made most perfect as the gift of the Virgin Mother, Mary. The Son of God, born in eternity of the Heavenly Father, is born in time for us as the son of Mary; it was wonderful beyond all telling that for our sake our God became one of us.

“Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son and his name will be Immanuel, which means “God is with us”.” This name signifies that two natures are united in this one person. Born in eternity the Son was also conceived in Mary’s womb in the fullness of time. The weakness of our humanity is now united to the infinite strength of God’s divinity. The Son began to be what we are without ceasing to be what he had always been. God lost nothing and nothing was taken from us.

Mary brought forth her first-born, the child of her own being, and give birth to one who was begotten of God and so existed before all creatures. He was given the name, Jesus, and this name, as the angel proclaimed, means that he frees us from sin. He likewise frees us from the mental and bodily weaknesses that we bring upon ourselves by sinning.

Christ, as “Messiah”, bears a name that signifies anointing by the Heavenly Father. He was made a prophet, a priest, and a king. What’s more, we are told that his anointing was a being *“anointed with the oil of gladness above all other kings”*. He wants to share this gladness with us. What better opportunity to claim this gift and make it our own than when so many influences move us to rejoice in his birth and saving work.

We not only rejoice at these works and anointings but are given a share in them. It is a spiritual and active grace and we receive in by receiving the name ‘Christian’. We bear it as Christ’s own name shared with us. We accept this as we do so many of his graces and we are to share them in turn with others. We are to imitate Christ in reaching out to all who are in spiritual or physical need.

Who could refuse to be reconciled with the God who gives so much and so many wonderful gifts? If we are truly reconciled, we have truly accepted a share in Christ’s mission. It is a gift that makes us more like him both in dedication to the Heavenly Father and in the ministry of compassion and charity to all in need.

Living these gifts is a marvelous way to celebrate Christ’s coming among us. The best way to show gratitude for a gift is to use it and the only way to show this gratitude for the gift of love and compassion is to exercise them on behalf of others. It doesn’t matter what sort of need they find themselves in. There is no one without a need for compassion or help or loving understanding or support. We have received all gifts these freely. Our mission is to freely give what we have freely received and to do it whenever we can.