

THE FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT
-----&-----
CHRISTMAS DAY
THE OCTAVE OF CHRISTMAS

- Sun** **The Fourth & Last Sunday of Advent**
Dec. 24 **God Leads Us Beyond our Expectations**
 A reflection based on a text by Fr. Carroll Stuhlmueller
- Mon.** **Solemnity of the Nativity of the Lord**
25 **God's Call to Us to Come to Bethlehem**
 A reflection based on a sermon by St. Aelred of Rievaulx
- Tues.** **The Feast of St. Stephen, the First Martyr**
26 **The Joy and Sorrow that is of God**
 A reflection based on a text by T. S. Eliot
- Wed.** **The Feast of St. John the Evangelist**
27 **The Thunder of Love**
 A reflection combining texts by Cardinal Newman
 & St. John Chrysostom
- Thur.** **The Feast of the Holy Innocents**
28 **The First Fruits of God's Saving Love**
 A reflection from "Prison Meditations" by Fr. Alfred Delp
- Fri.** **The Fifth Day in the Octave of Christmas**
29 **The Birth of True Mercy among Us**
 A reflection based on a sermon by Bl. Gueric of Igny
- Sat.** **The Sixth Day in the Octave of Christmas**
30 **Recovering Spiritual Vigor**

A reflection based on a sermon by Bl. Gueric of Igny
GOD LEADS US BEYOND OUR EXPECTATIONS
A reflection based on a text by Fr. Carroll Stuhlmueller

This Sunday's scriptures, and those of the entire Octave of Christmas, call us to allow God to lead us beyond all that our own strengths and efforts can accomplish. The first illustration is provided by King David, a person who had succeeded in everything he had attempted. Yet God won't accept from him a temple to dwell in. God has always been present in a tent. That meant God would and did go wherever God's people were led. In John's Gospel the Son's incarnation in the womb of the Virgin Mary is described as God's pitching a tent among us. God is not only with us but within us but goes with us everywhere.

Though God didn't accept David's offering of a temple, God did promise to use the House and throne of David to be with us and shepherd us, and promised to do this always. As we know from history, David's dynasty ceased to rule and has never been restored. God realized the promise to David in a wholly unexpected way, Jesus. And Jesus moves among God's People, shepherding them as David once cared for sheep, and doing this wherever we are. God always does it for us.

Like ancient Israelites, we picture God's promises being realized in ways they aren't. God helps us accomplish marvelous things, as in David's case, but lets them fail, as David dynasty did. God gives us Jesus, and seems to take Jesus away, pitching a tent among us and folding it in order to lead us in another direction or by another path. Are we ready to trust God and go wherever we may be led? Mary had to do and Jesus had to, so what about you and me?

God's promise to David, and so to Israel, got turned into a promise to keep an institution working for always. But it always fails to last. It is most a human construction and only God remains forever. Israel thought that God's promise to David had to mean Davidic Kingship would never fail. It failed as a human construction but endures always in Jesus, the Christ. The Church is a divinely founded institution but its actual ways of doing things fail regularly like other human creations. We are thrown back upon trust in Jesus Christ. God is always leading us in ways and to places we don't expect or don't want to accept.

What we want often turns out not to be what God wants. The institutions we create fail no matter what we try to do to prop them up. These facts lead us ever again to the mystery of the Incarnation. During each Advent we are asked: Do you believe in the mystery of godliness within us, with what is humanly made in our communities and families and Church? Are you ready to be taken "by surprise"? Expecting what we don't expect, or want to expect, is paradoxical. Yet that is what our God asks of us. If we aren't ready to have God achieve what is different from our plans or expectations we aren't ready for the Incarnation. What we are asked is to be ready to sing forever the goodness of the Lord, however it comes to us.

GOD'S CALL TO US TO COME TO BETHLEHEM

A reflection based on a sermon by St. Aelred of Rievaulx

"Today in the city of David, the Savior of the world is born for us and he is Christ, the Lord!" That city is named Bethlehem. We must run to Bethlehem along with the shepherds! We must put into action the words we traditionally sing at this season. It must be said of us: They sang of God's glory and hastened to Bethlehem. We too must find the sign that is a child wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying on straw.

What do we think of when we think of a babe new born? We think of love. We feel called to love. So what I say to you is this: Love! You fear the Lord of angels but you love the tiny babe. You fear the Lord who reigns in heaven but you love the one who lies in the manger. Is ours the same sign the shepherds received?

Bethlehem means "House of Bread". What is the House of Bread to which we are called? It is our church, the house where we are given the Bread of Life. Swaddling clothes are ordinarily white. We are called to come to the House of Life's Lord wrapped in the white garments of our baptism. We come to find a babe and we find him within ourselves; we find him dwelling in our hearts. We are called to open our hearts and lives to love he wants to give through us, and so let our lives be transformed into a living of God's love given to us in Jesus.

Let me say it again. We are given the sign of a babe wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger. This manger is our altar. That is where we find our food and find it is the love he gives us, and by which he gives us himself. He is wrapped in the swaddling clothes that are the outward forms and rites of the sacraments. In them we find the real and true babe. We have no greater proof of Christ's birth and of his love than our daily reception of his body and blood at the holy altar. We have sight of him who was once born of the Virgin and once and for all offered himself in sacrifice for us. What more can we ask? What greater gift could we give than bringing others with us to Bethlehem?

So let us hurry to our manger, the manger of the Lord. But before we draw near let us prepare ourselves with the help of grace. Then with pure hearts, and in the company of the angels, we can sing his praise. With a pure heart, with unfeigned faith, with a good conscience we can sing to the Lord throughout an entire lifetime. Glory to God in the highest and peace to God's people on earth! That is what we sing with the angels and sing with Christ himself. We begin singing as we shall sing rejoicing for all the days of eternity.

THE JOY AND THE SORROW THAT IS OF GOD

A reflection based on a text by T.S. Eliot

Have you ever thought carefully about the fact that at Christmas we recall, and celebrate, not only Christ's birth for us but his death for us? The two can't be separated. But that isn't the end of our reflections, or shouldn't be. They actually continue when we think of the fact that the day after Christmas is the special day of St. Stephen's martyrdom. Do you think it is an accident that the celebration of the first martyr follows immediately the day of the Birth of Christ? By no means.

Just as we rejoice and mourn together in the Birth and Passion of Our Lord, so also, in the smaller figure of a martyr, we both rejoice and mourn. We mourn for the sins of the world that have martyred both Christ and Stephen and we rejoice that they have joined the communion of saints in Heaven. We rejoice in the glory of God and the salvation of many others and we mourn for they way this was brought about.

Beloved, let us not think of a martyr simply as a good Christian who has been killed because of being a Christian. That would lead only to mourning. Nor do we think of martyrs simply as good Christians who have been elevated to the company of the saints. That would lead only to rejoicing. Granted, neither our mourning or our rejoicing would be as the world's is but there is more to it.

A Christian's martyrdom is not the effect of a human's willing to become a saint. By willing people contrive to rule over others and they often do this by means of deception, cajolery, and violence. These are actions that pile impurity upon impurity. This is not the way things are done in Heaven!

A martyr, a saint, is always made by the design of God; e.g., by God's love of humankind or by God's warning us or leading us back to God's ways. A true martyr is one who has become an instrument of God, not so much by losing one's will in God's but rather by finding one's own freedom in submission to God. The martyr doesn't desire anything for self, not even martyrdom.

As on earth the Church mourns and rejoices at once, but in a fashion that the world cannot understand, so in Heaven the saints are most highly exalted not because they have made themselves most lowly, seeing themselves not as people of the world see them but in the light of the Godhead from who they draw their being, but because they willed to love God above all else. This is what we celebrate as we rejoice in St. Stephen. It is that out of sorrow and mourning God has drawn glory. Because of this we are invited to show forth that glory in gladness, even as we mourn the sin that has now been swallowed up in glory.

THE THUNDER OF LOVE

A reflection by Cardinal Newman & St. John Chrysostom

St. John is celebrated for his declarations about Christian love. “Beloved, let us love one another for love is God. If we love one another, God dwells in us.” But did John begin with some vast effort to love on a large scale? No, he was the personal friend of Christ, and in that way he was taught to love others. First his love was concentrated, then it was expanded to tend to our Lord’s mother. Could one who was first favored with his savior’s special affection be trusted to perform a son’s duties toward the Lord’s mother? And could such a one be other than a pattern of love, of contemplative, deep, fervent, unruffled, unbonded love? (so far Cardinal Newman)

So, John comes before us as one crying out from heaven in a voice more powerful than thunder. It has reached the whole world for he spoke by divine grace. It was truly a wondrous thing, a sound more pleasing than any music and capable of soothing every upset. It is holy, awesome and teeming with great mysteries and benefits. To receive them makes one more than a dweller on earth and lifts one to heaven. That sound is the call to love God and one another.

A Son of Thunder, the Beloved disciple of Christ, the pillar of all the worlds’ churches, now comes to us because this is his special day. He has drunk of the chalice of Christ and been baptized with Christ’s own baptism, and confidently rested his head upon the breast of the Lord. He is ready to proclaim Christ-love.

He is not engaged in mere play acting though he has all heaven for his stage as well as the entire world. He speaks to those who are ready to hear him correctly and show this by their works. These are the kind of listeners whom our situation demands.

The powers above stand beside this Apostle, astounded at the beauty of his soul and at his understanding. It is so wonderful that even Christ was drawn to him and gave him special grace in the Spirit. It is by this Spirit that he became able to give forth the marvelous, thunderous sound all the world has heard. It is the sound of love lived fully.

Let us listen no longer as to a fisherman or son of Zebedee, but as to one who knows the deep things of God. It is the Holy Spirit who now plays this marvelous instrument of peace and mutual support. He doesn’t speak anything that is merely human to us. He draws upon deep spiritual resources and reserves and, at the bidding of Christ, he opens them for us. Let us drink everything in, and then live it in loving one another. This is all that John asks of us and it is what Christ, our Lord, expects of us. It is Christ whom we follow when we follow John.

THE FIRST FRUITS OF GOD'S SAVING LOVE

A reflection drawn from "Prison Meditations" by Fr. Alfred Delp

The children of Bethlehem share today's scene with the Lord. The mystery of the words, "all this happened because the Lord came" applies particularly to these children. They were not martyred because of the power of a frightened and insane tyrant—that is made quite clear. And we see how completely all life is in the possession of Our Lord who came as a child. It is not mere pious sentiment to all that Child "Kyrios". Our concept of God must retain all its grandeur and even become firmer. Then the love we profess will also be strong, and effective, and reliable.

The mystery of the Innocents is that they are the victims. The divine eagle gathered them as booty to himself. The blow aimed by the tyrant at our Lord fell on them instead. They serve as a kind of guard of honor to the Divine Child. And the militant dialogue between God and anti-God in which they are caught up earns them heaven.

But we seem to have lost our awareness of that ceaseless duel; we so little realize that we have a share in that struggle that we ignore it completely. Yet no one can escape responsibility and, at any moment, God, exercising sovereign power, may draw us into the thick of it. So far as an adult is concerned, this can only lead to salvation if the victim voluntarily accepts the combat and enters it on God's side.

But in the case of the innocents, the Lord's manger sealed their fate and was sacrifice enough. That is their mystery. And it is also their message and judgment. God has done something we don't yet understand.

Have we perhaps become insensitive to the sovereignty of God? Even where awareness of it still exists, a clear-cut concept of this fact about our relationship to God, and about the order to which it belongs, is lacking. Knowledge of the God under whose inexorable law we exist has been dissolved in a mist of psychological babble, worries about subjective reactions to living conditions or other concerns about collective existential needs. This is one of the worst

evils of our time. The fact is that God chooses to save us. It is this choice that makes all the difference, for us as it did for the innocents.

THE BIRTH OF TRUE MERCY AMONG US

A reflection based on a sermon by Bl. Gueric of Igny

Unto us a child is born, a child in bodily form and age but the ancient of days as the Eternal Word and past understanding. Every single thing grows old just in the measure it grows far from Him, and is renewed in the degree it draws close. His eternal begetting is more glorious but that in time is more lavish in mercy for us who so need mercy. Lord, show your mercy to all of us who are not yet fit to see your glory!

O you sons of Adam, exceedingly great in your own eyes and giants in pride, unless you turn and become like this little child you cannot enter the Kingdom. Can we still be proud after the Most High has emptied himself? We lead ourselves astray because if we would be truly great we must become humble. Be humble in all things and find grace before God.

It did not seem enough to God to assume a mortal nature; he would take on the state of helpless infancy. This is an amazing mystery. In this little child there is a fountain of mercies and an abyss of judgment. Who has drunk of this fountain and not been filled with love? There is no reason for getting frightened about judgment unless one sets oneself up in haughtiness against mercy. When God shows himself to us mortals he prefers to present himself as a child to inspire love.

So let us come to the throne of mercy with confidence. Here we find every sort of kindness and gentleness to give us confidence. God hides power so as to pardon the penitent and humble. In the guise of a child God doesn't yet know how to be angry, and if angered can easily be pleased again. This child makes the first overtures of peace and satisfaction. We only have to want reconciliation and it will be granted, grace heaped upon grace.

O wonderful child, good Jesus, how great is the abundance of your sweet mercy! You hid it so as to reveal it to those who trust you. You have shown it even to those who do not yet know you. What incomparable loving kindness! I see the God who made me make himself a little child for my sake. Truly you are the Child-God and my champion and God! You are all that is sweet and gentle and desirable. So for now it is wonderful just to think of my Child-God and to find in Jesus the best remedy for curing all that is angry or bitter within us. Where this is remembered how can there be a place for anger or sadness?

As ourselves new born babes, let us worthily praise the new born infant Lord. In complete harmony not only of voices but of lives let us perfect praise. Isn't it out of the mouths of babes that God perfects praise? So let us first of all praise the God who has become a little child! Let us praise our Lord Jesus Christ! It is

to him, with God the Father and the Spirit, that all praise is due. It is in praise that we shall find mercy too!

RECOVERING SPIRITUAL VIGOR

A reflection based on a sermon by Bl. Gueric of Igny

Am I speaking to anyone suffering from spiritual weariness? Let such a person go to Bethlehem to see the Word of God. In your mind you can picture the living and creative word of God lying in a manger for you. What could better strengthen hope and set one's love aflame? You will see a word you can trust. In deep silence the Almighty Word has made its way to a manger and spoken to us by silence. Listen to this loving and mysterious silence for it speaks of peace.

Too many say foolish things. "With our tongues we can do great things; our lips are good friends to us and make us our own masters". At Bethlehem the Word sums up all that truly makes for our salvation and brings about justice and right in a brief word.

God couldn't speak to us as spiritual but only as fleshly, and so the Word was made flesh so that all flesh might not only be able to hear it but see that it was God's word. In wisdom the world didn't come to know God, so Divine Wisdom became what seemed foolish—it became a word even the uneducated, even the stupid, could learn. I give you thanks, Lord of Heaven and of earth, because you hid wisdom from the wise and showed it to little ones. It is with little ones that this Little One rests in quiet and humility.

See why the Lord can say of little ones, "Behold me, and the children which God has given me". The Holy Spirit teaches us that of such little ones is the Kingdom of Heaven. But if we want to be made little again we have to make our way to Bethlehem and look with all earnestness upon the Word which has been made flesh and become a little one for our sake.

We learn the Wisdom of God from the humility with which He comes to us. In this all-embracing virtue, and in silence, we find the supreme wisdom who willed to know nothing but humility and to become its teacher. Blessed the faith of the shepherds, who saw all this and weren't scandalized. Seeing how he emptied himself completely for them they gave Him in response the whole of their affections. You too will find that infant if you go to Bethlehem. Take care that nothing of his poverty and lowliness offend you.

Mary wrapped Jesus in swaddling clothes, and our mother Grace covers him with the appearances of the sacraments of salvation, even as our mother Wisdom covers him with the figures preachers use. Faith prepares us for the eternal life in which we will see Him as He is. Be patient and cherish that word implanted in you which calls you to salvation.

May all the wealth of Christ's world dwell in you. Love and remember the Incarnate Word. Sing of Him happily and faithfully as you see him clothed in the

swaddling bands that wrap him now but will be removed to reveal his glory, and our sharing in it. This will restore our spiritual vigor. To Him be glory and honor for ever.