

SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT

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A reflection developed from a homily by Origen of Alexandria

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WELCOMING CHRIST INTO OUR HOME

A reflection developed from a homily by Origen of Alexandria

“Prepare a way for the Lord!” We hear this cry so often and we think, “We too must prepare the way for the coming of Christ”. That is how we understand the work of John the Baptist, and that of Moses, and that of the prophets—especially Isaiah. When we look at the texts of Scripture we find many calls to turn to God. But the best way to turn to God is to follow Jesus, so all those who call anyone to God actually are calling people to Jesus.

Think of the person you were before you turned to God and again put your faith in Jesus. Doing that made Jesus the foundation of your hopes. Recall Isaiah’s words, “*The voice of one crying in the wilderness, Prepare the way for the Lord; make his paths straight and every valley will be filled in*”. You were called by Isaiah, and by John the Baptist, and then by someone you knew, and now you are to call others. But we were “ways” which needed to be straightened and leveled and we were like deep valleys, or even steep-sided pits that we ourselves couldn’t get out of. Yet the Lord Jesus came, and filled us with the Holy Spirit, and we found that we had all sorts of ways to help others and to please God.

The love of God didn’t abandon us, struggling to get out of the dead ends we created as we sought good things. Jesus’ love ended the struggle and filled us with peace, patience, goodness, and all sorts of good works. We became a kind of home where God dwells, we even become mountains of God, so to speak.

Once the human race felt blocked by many hostile powers. Isaiah pictured these as mountains and hills that needed to be laid low. But they have been overcome and we can now walk on a straight and level path to God’s House, and find that God is right here within us. We have become mountains of God because we show others God’s love and salvation, as a way out of whatever pits of frustration they may have fallen into.

Isaiah’s prophecy continues: “*Every crooked way shall be straightened.*” We were once crooked but we are so no longer. That is due to the grace of Christ. It comes to us often in the form of example. We pray each day to be able to cry out: “*It is no longer I who live but Christ lives in me*”. Jesus, our Lord, has come. He has smoothed out the rough places and changed the crooked ways in straight ones. We each have been made into a level path that leads to Christ and so to God. God, the Heavenly Father, now walks in you. Christ, the Lord, now makes a home in you. You have been given the task of leading others to Christ so that they may be made God’s paths, and homes where God dwells and so is able to reveal divine life and love through their deeds.

In us a prophecy has been fulfilled: “*My Father and I will come and make our home in them*”. That is exactly what God has done through our faith in Jesus. It is by living *and* laboring with Jesus that we become revelations of God to one another. Accept these gifts and you will be a light of hope.

HELPING PEOPLE RECOGNIZE CHRIST

A reflection developed from “The Way of Freedom” by Fr. E. Schillebeeckx

“In Isaiah the prophet it is written: I send my messenger before you to prepare your way” (Mk.1: 8). The stories we hear in the Gospels tell us that people didn’t recognize messengers of God for what they were, and yet that they also failed to recognize the persons the messengers pointed to as making God’s call present to them. The message to us depends on our belief that we do recognize the people we hear of as messengers from God but we have to ask whether we recognize the message they proclaim as one sent to us by God. If we do, why not act on it?

The Scripture texts we hear during Advent present us with a web of reminiscences about various messengers of God and the messages God sent them to proclaim. They all lead up to Jesus and his message. Now all these messages were about hope, what we call “Messianic expectations” but these aren’t merely historical facts. These “expectations” are hopes for being set free! Do you want to be freed of anything? If not, you are unusual, and if so how do you expect this will become really possible for you?

Christianity, and Jesus Christ, are about liberation and freedom. Israel was freed from Egypt. Then it was freed from various robbers and plunderers. Then it was freed from Babylonian exile. But the definitive freedom for all human kind was accomplished by and in Jesus Christ. Are you, then, free?

Have you every worried that living out Christ’s message would land you in jail? Have you ever worried that following Christ would lead you into a desert where you would be without all your ordinary supports? We are called to be liberators—just as were Moses and the prophets and Jesus. The work of freeing people is not a smooth and triumphal progress that everyone cheers for! We keep finding ourselves in various kinds of wilderness and have to keep going nevertheless. Our task is to bring others to freedom and we know freedom only in doing it.

The various prophets, right down to John the Baptist, didn’t see themselves as marvelous liberators but as worthless servants doing barely what they were told to do. When Jesus came, attention was called to him by an eccentrically dressed young man who seemed to live and act in a crazy way. Worse, the one to whom he called attention wasn’t obviously special at all. You wouldn’t notice him in a crowd. Jesus’ coming to and among us is so unobtrusive that he could easily escape notice, if someone weren’t constantly pointing to him.

God never comes, so it seems, in a way that meets our expectations. God never comes through people who are obviously “messengers of God”—in Scriptural words ‘angels’. Yet God needs forerunners to announce Jesus Christ as salvation and freedom and you are one. Look for the ways God gives you to do what is asked and begin to do it—it will set you free too.

COMPASSION LEADS US TO GOD

A reflection based on the Proclamation of Mary as “Patroness of the Americas”

Mary, the Mother of Jesus, has been entrusted by God with the task of leading many to Jesus and salvation. When she came to the Aztec, Juan Diego, and asked to have a church built at Tepayac she explained the request as follows: “*I want a church in this place where your people can experience compassion*”. It was through loving and compassionate care that Native Americans were to be drawn to Jesus and so to the Heavenly Father.

All this was done using the language of the Aztec, their mode of picture writing, and their way of understanding what helps people live and have a good life. Although the early missionary work had emphasized how different was the faith that the European conquerors were bringing, Mary’s dealings with Juan Diego emphasized just the opposite. She showed that the God revealed through Jesus Christ accepted them, and much of the culture that made them distinctive. More of what they were brought them close to God than separated them from God.

Aztec beliefs focused on what people had to give to the gods in order to have life. Mary spoke only of what God wanted to give them. God was giving love and compassion and strength to do what needed to be done to accept many gifts. Nothing was said about what had to be given up or put away. The actual building that was erected in response to Mary’s request was very modest—both by Spanish and Aztec standards. It was only large enough to house the picture of Mary printed mysteriously on the cloak of Juan Diego. Although the modern basilica is very grand, its existence has the same purpose. It enables Mexicans to come and find compassion and strength by contemplating God’s gift to them through the Mother of Jesus, “the Lord of Heaven and earth who gives and maintains creation”. This was evidenced graphically by the healing of Juan Diego’s uncle. Mary’s message was one of life, which seemed to Aztecs the hardest of all things to keep hold of.

The picture of Mary came with a gift of roses in bloom. They were not only in bloom during the height of the winter season but were roses proper to Spain rather than to Mexico. This symbolized a gift of new life where it was least to be expected and from a source to which no Native American then looked. In great part, the Christian missionaries in Mexico tried to ignore the apparition of the Virgin Mary and her message to the native peoples. Nevertheless, the message was heard and seems to have been the key to the mass conversion of these peoples to Christ. We celebrate this gift of God by announcing the same message to all. We know God’s great mercy in forgiveness and inner transformation, personally and as a Church. We too receive the command to share this gift. Juan Diego spent the remainder of his life as custodian of the shine containing the picture of Mary, explaining it to all who came to visit. Can the peoples of the Americas not do this for our entire world?

THE KIND OF LIGHT THAT COMES FROM FAITH

A reflection developed from a St. Lucy website presentation

St. Lucy was very important to Italy's Christians of the era of persecution because she summed up what they all prayed for the grace to be, if they were arrested. Her feast day is December 13th because in the Julian calendar that was the shortest day of the year, and so the time when light began to grow greater than darkness. She saw the light of Christ so clearly that she didn't hesitate to give her possessions to help the poor and to give herself totally to Christ as his spouse. That meant she turned away from what were key values in pagan culture, and to a purely Christian view of life's meaning. She did this in spite of threats, tortures and finally martyrdom.

Much of this was symbolized by the legends that her eyes were gouged out but that she could still see, and that though condemned she could not be physically moved so the sentence could be carried out. These legends reminded fellow Christians of what they believed, and wanted to live if they were arrested and/or condemned for their faith. Christ has given us a love and life which are deeper and richer and more enduring than anything ordinary political or human powers can give or take away. So, we must put Christ first. That is what St. Lucy did and so she became a light to all her fellow Christians.

The feast of Virgin Martyrs like Lucy provided a marvelous example and model for others, and that is why her feast day has been continued down to the present. There are many things that attract people to place their hope for a good life in what is not God or not compatible with following in the footsteps of Jesus Christ. Lucy rejected them all, not because they were bad things—she didn't consider marriage or being wealthy as bad. She rejected them because she hoped for something much better. She was so sure of her hope that she was willing to die rather than give it up. What Christian wouldn't want to do that, and wouldn't pray for the grace?

Since Jesus Christ is the supreme example of whole-hearted hope in God, and whole-hearted love for others, St. Lucy is celebrated close to the feast of Christ's birth. In each of us the light grows brighter as we learn to place more of our hope on Christ and live it more completely. There are so many saints because we need many to show us our many opportunities. Each of us can give others insight into how rich and wonderful a fully Christian is. What St. Lucy did for the people of her time we are called to do as well—no matter what happens or threatens.

Lucy learned from her mother. We all need examples of living faith. We may or may not find this in our homes. We have received the gift of faith and for most of us it was given to us as children by our parents. It is now our turn to pass that gift on to others, whether it be the gift of having faith or that of living faith more and more whole-heartedly.

HOW FAITH LEADS TO PERFECTION

A reflection from “The Dark Night of the Soul” by St. John of the Cross

Sometime beginners in the spiritual life make little of their faults and at other times they become over-concerned with them. They are in danger of falling into themselves. One may think one is a saint already and become angry and impatient with one’s imperfections. This is just another imperfection. One may beg God with great yearning to take away imperfections and faults, but not do it for God’s sake but so as not to be troubled by these things and not have to see oneself as one is. Such people want peace rather than God. If God did take away their imperfections they would likely become proud and even presumptuous.

Such persons dislike praising others and love to be praised. They may even seek out such praise. Those on the path to perfection proceed very differently, and with a different spirit. They long to be taught by anyone who can lead them to better things. This gives them a real tranquility and humbleness. The group previously spoken of prefers always to be teaching. If another seems to teach them they take the words from that person’s mouth, so to speak, as if they already knew what they are actually just learning.

Those going in the right direction have no desire to be anyone’s master but are very ready to set out a road other than their own when told to do so. They never think they are right, so they rejoice when others are praised and grieve only for not serving God as those others do.

Persons on the path to perfection will give their hearts’ blood to anyone who serves God and will help them serve God in as much as in them lies. The imperfections into which they see themselves fall are accepted with humility and meekness of spirit, and with a loving fear of God. Their hope is in God. Those who begin the journey to perfection with this spirit are unfortunately few. It would be wonderful if only a few fell into the contrary errors I have described. It is for such reasons that God leads us into the dark night where those God wishes are purified from all sorts of imperfections. God does this in order to bring them farther and farther down the road to Him.

THE GRACE OF THE LORD'S PRESENT COMING

A reflection taken from a sermon by Bl. Gueric of Igny

Behold the King is coming! Let us hurry to go and meet our Savior. One who announces the Savior's coming certainly brings good news! The world is reconciled and the good things to come are assured! And there are so many who announce him—many yet with one mind. From the land of the living the prophets were sent, and the angels too. And our soul is heard to reply with Elizabeth, "*How is this that my Lord should come to me? The spirit in my heart leaps for joy.*" Yes, we really should go to meet the coming Christ with joy in our hearts. Let us adore him and cry out, Deliver us, Lord! Deliver us!

Holy Scripture seems to insist that we have such joy so that our spirit may run to meet Christ, straining forward impatiently and striving to come into the future even now. Indeed, before his actual second coming may the Lord come to us as on a friendly visit. This coming will be hidden only in that the Lord will come secretly. That is why the soul is filled with glory and exults to have this secret right now as a light to soul and mind. The inconceivable is understood!

Into what sweet and happy state of absorbed admiration does Christ plunge and keep our souls as we contemplate him? Our inward person exclaims, "Lord, who is like you?" Those who have experienced this know of what I speak. Would that all would experience it, and really desire that childlike love might be strengthened in them by this grace. The Lord lifts up the meek and brings the wicked down to the dust, but gives grace to the humble.

Since the first coming brought grace, and the last will bring glory, this one partakes of both. Through the consolation of grace, we are given a foretaste of future glory. In the first the God of majesty is seen as one despised, and in the last he will be seen in awe-inspiring might, but in this one he is wonderful and loveable. Utterly wonderful and loveable it is when God, the love of all lovers, is grasped even by the senses, and when the Bridegroom embraces the Bride and they become one in spirit. The bride is transformed into the same image in which, as in a mirror, she sees the glory of the Lord. How blessed are they, who because of their burning love, have already merited to receive this privilege. Blessed too are they whose holy simplicity leads them to hope for it. The first already enjoy a relief from labor and a fruit of their love. The others, whose merit is perhaps the greater as their relief is less, bear the burden of the day and its heat. They await the coming reward.

And so, my dearest ones, we who have not had experience of such a wonderful consolation are in the meantime encouraged by firm faith and a pure conscience to wait patiently for the coming of the Lord. That faith cries out, with as much joy as fidelity, in St. Paul's words, "*I know whom I have believed and I am certain he is able to keep that which I have committed to him against that day.*" We await the coming of the glory of the Great God and our Savior, Jesus Christ. To the Three be glory for ever!

LET US STIR UP OUR HOPE FOR SALVATION

A reflection taken from a sermon by St. Bernard

Let's reflect for a moment on the time God chose for sending us our Savior. We are told that it was at the "end of the ages". God had determined in his wisdom to bring help to our race only when the need was greatest. God knows how prone we are to ingratitude. So, notice that the sun of justice was giving diminished light and warmth to our earth when he came. The light which is the knowledge of God seemed feeble and, as sin increased, so charity grew cold. Angels no longer appeared and no prophet raised a voice to lead us back to God. It seemed as though all had been overcome by hardness and obstinacy and all had ceased to intervene in our affairs.

It was just at this point that the Son of God cried out, Here I am! Eternity broke in upon the world. Temporal prosperity was at its height. There was peace between nations so that at one person's word a census of the whole world could be taken. It seems we know when the Savior came and why, but we still have to get to know how he makes his approach. You see, we need to go out to meet him. We know that he has already come in visible flesh so as to work at saving each individual person. Now he comes in a daily but hidden and spiritual way to further our individual salvation.

As Scripture says, "*The Lord's anointed is the breath of life for us*". Surely, even if a sick person can't go far to meet a great physician yet one can at least make an effort to lift up one's head and raise oneself up just a little to greet him as he draws near. It isn't necessary for you to cross the seas, nor to pierce the clouds, not to climb high mountains so as to meet your God. It is not a lengthy road that is set before you. You only have to enter into yourself to find your Savior. As Scripture says, "*His word is very near you. It is on your lips and in your heart*". We encounter Christ in compunction of heart and in confession of sins. Leave behind the dunghill that is a defiled conscience. Now you see why the observance of the Advent of Christ is so important. Christ is coming to each one of us and will enlighten our minds and to fill our hearts with the power of his Spirit. Let us do what his grace grants us so that we may truly welcome Him.