

THE FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT & CHRISTMAS

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RUNNING TO MEET OUR KING

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

Our king and savior is coming! Let's run to meet him! Good news coming from a far country is like cold water to a thirsty person! One who announces the coming of our Savior and the reconciliation of the world, together with all the good things of the life to come, indeed brings good news. Such a messenger bears refreshment for all who thirst for God. We have joyfully been offered water from the springs of salvation. "Why is this granted to me, that my Lord should come to me?"

So let's arise with joy and run in spirit to meet our Savior. Hailing him from afar, let's worship him and say: "We have waited for you, Lord, be our strong-hold, our salvation in time of trouble!" We must look forward to the day of Christ's birth. Scripture itself insists that joy must fill us as we strain forward for his coming, impatient of delay to see what the future holds in store. As we believe that our bodies will rise up rejoicing at his second coming so our hearts must run forward to greet his first.

Between these two comings the Lord frequently visits us individually, in accordance with our desires and our merits. He forms us to the likeness of his first coming in the flesh and so prepares us for his return at the end of time. He comes to us now to make sure that we don't lose the fruits of his first coming nor incur wrath at his second. Christ's purpose now is to convert our pride into the humility which he showed when he first came. We are to let ourselves be refashioned in our lowliness into the likeness of the glory shown in his glorified body. This he will manifest when he comes again.

My brothers and sisters, through we haven't yet experienced the wonderful consolation of his comings we are encouraged by firm faith and a conscience made pure to wait patiently for the Lord to come again. With joy and confidence we can say with St. Paul: "I know whom I have believed, and I am sure that he is able to guard until That Day what has been entrusted to me". He will do this until "the appearing of the glory of our Great God and Savior, Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever.

CHRIST IS BORN IN US!

A reflection from a sermon by Martin Luther

The Gospel teaches that Christ was born, that he died and suffered every thing on our behalf. In these words you clearly see that He is born for us. The angel didn't simply say, "Christ is born" but that "to you" Christ is born. He brings you glad tidings of great joy. Furthermore, this joy was not to remain in Christ but was to be for all the People. Christ has a pure, innocent and holy birth. We all had an unclean and sinful birth, as David says in Psalm 51. For this purpose Christ willed to be born, that through him we might be born anew.

This is the great joy of which the angel spoke. It is part of the comfort and exceeding goodness of God that if anyone believes that person can boast of Mary as true mother, of Christ as true brother, and of God as true father. These things actually happened but we must believe they are true. This is the principal treasure in the Gospel. Christ must above all things become our own and we must become Christ's.

Therefore, see to it that you don't treat the Gospel as only history, for that is passing and is not to be valued apart from faith. Rather, see to it that you make this birth your own and that Christ be born in you. This will be the case if you believe. Then you will rest in the lap of the Virgin Mary and be her dear child. But while you live you must exercise faith and pray. You can't establish faith too firmly. The Gospel doesn't merely teach about the history of Christ. It enables all who believe to receive it as their own history. That is how the Gospel operates.

If Christ has indeed become your own, and you by faith have been cleansed, it follows that you will do good works by doing to your neighbor as Christ has done to you. You have no other commandment than to serve Christ and render obedience to him. Direct your works that they may benefit your neighbor. Jesus said at the Last Supper, "*This is my commandment, that you love one another even as I have loved you.*" Christ helps us, so we in return help our neighbor. Christ has given you an example to follow. The shepherds dwelt under the canopy of heaven and didn't hold fast to temporal things. Besides they were despised and unknown; they represent the lowly and despised and unnoticed and eagerly desire the Gospel. Like them we are to tell it to others and be shepherds to others.

Let everyone do a self-examination in the light of the Gospel. Look to see how far you are from Christ. Don't denounce the people of Bethlehem who received Christ unkindly but look around you and see how many of your fellows need help. Don't you ignore them! Who is there who has no poor or miserable or sick or erring people to help? Why don't you do for them as Christ has done for you? Then Christ will be born in you.

THE WORLD INTO WHICH CHRIST COMES

A reflection by Giovanni Papini

Jesus was born in a stable, a real stable. It wasn't a bright and airy portico created by painters for the Son of David, as if ashamed that God should have lain down in poverty and dirt. It wasn't a modern creche made of plaster of Paris and filled with statuettes, a holy and a clean stable with a tidy manger, an ecstatic ass, a contrite ox and angels fluttering about with wreaths near the roof. That wasn't the stable where Jesus was born.

A real stable is a kind of prison for animals who have been made the slaves of mankind. It is a dirty pavement, roughly constructed and dark and reeking. The only clean thing in it is the manger where the owner piles the hay and fodder. Once it was fresh grass and flowers. Cut down and dried it was dragged to the stable. There the animals take it slowly with their large, black lips, recalling from it odor the clean fields and their flowers. Now they will change it into dung, to be hauled back to the fields, while the litter they leave behind becomes bedding.

This is the real stable where Jesus was born. The filthiest place in the world was the first room for the only pure person every born into this world. The Son of Man was born here—only to be devoured by wild beast calling themselves men. His first cradle was the manger where the animals chewed the cud and remembered the miraculous flowers of spring.

It wasn't by chance that Christ was born in a stable. What is the world but an immense stable where men produce filth and wallow in it? Daily they change what is most divine into dung. They stretch themselves full length on the piles of manure they say they are enjoying life. In this earthly stable Jesus appeared one night, born of a stainless Virgin, armed only with innocence.

Symbolically, the first to worship Jesus were animals and not humans. He was to seek out the simple and pure of heart but the beasts were simpler yet and milder, and they welcomed him. People had created idols looking like animals. Israel create a golden calf at Sinai. Similar things, we are told, happened in Greece, and in Rome and in Egypt. The kings of the earth and their peoples had bowed before such creations, but Jesus didn't come into the world to reign over it, nor to love material things. He was to bring an end to bowing down before beasts, some of whom would murder him.

In later years, when Jesus went to the city of death for the Passover Feast, he was mounted on an ass. But he was a greater prophet than Balaam, whose ass saved him so he could save Israel by saving only God's words. He didn't turn back from the path God showed him, in spite of all the braying of people behaving like mules. He has shown us our path too. In the world stable we are to live love, even if we have to suffer as Jesus did.

HOW WE MUST RECEIVE OUR LORD

A reflection taken from a sermon by St. Aelred of Rievaulx

“Today the Savior of the world is born for us: Christ the Lord, in the city of David!” That city is Bethlehem and we must run there, as the shepherds did when they heard of these things. We must put into action the words we chant traditionally at Christmas, ***“They sang of God’s glory; they hurried to Bethlehem”***.

“And this shall be a sign for you; you will find the child wrapped in swaddling bands and lying in a manger.” Now this is what I say: You must love! You fear the Lord of Angels, but I say, love the tiny babe. You fear the Lord of Majesty, but I say, love the infant wrapped in swaddling bands. You fear the one who reigns in heaven, but I say, love the one who lies in the manger. What sort of sign were the shepherds given? ***“You will find the child lying in a manger.”***

This is how they were to recognize their Savior and Lord! But is there anything great about being wrapped in swaddling bands and lying in a stable? Yet this is a great sign, if we only understand it correctly. We will understand if the message of love is not restricted to our hearing but if our hearts too are illuminated by the light which accompanies the appearance of the angels. It teaches us that only those whose minds are spiritually enlightened can hear what the angels who first proclaimed the good new are saying.

Bethlehem as a name means “house of bread”. It is Holy Church. In it is administered the Body of Christ, the true bread. The manger at Bethlehem is the altar of our church; it is there that Christ’s creatures are fed. This is the table of which it is written, ***“You have prepared a banquet for me”***. In this manger is Jesus wrapped in the swaddling bands which are the outward form of the sacrament. Here in this manger, under the appearances of bread and wine, is the true body and blood of Christ.

We believe that Christ himself is here, but he is wrapped in swaddling bands; in other words, he is invisibly contained in these sacraments. We have no greater or clearer proof of Christ’s birth than our daily reception of his body and blood at the holy altar, and the sight of him who was once born for us from a Virgin is daily offered in sacrifice for us. So let us hasten to the manger of the Lord. But we must prepare ourselves as well as we can with the help of God’s grace. Then, in the company of the angels, with pure hearts, good consciences and unfeigned faith, we will sing to the Lord in all that we do throughout the entirety of our lives: ***“Glory to God in the highest, and peace on earth to all of good will”***. Let us do this through our Lord Jesus Christ who has blessed us with the love we give to one another and to all who are in need.

THE SORT OF PERSON STEPHEN IS

A reflection from a sermon by St. Gregory of Nyssa

Christ came into the world to save it. Immediately the Church began to bear fruit. The deacon Stephen shown out as a witness to the truth. In his company all those who witnessed to God's great plan of salvation shown out brightly. He was a disciple who followed the Master by walking in the footsteps of Jesus. After Christ there came Christ bearers. After the Sun of Justice there came human luminaries. The first to come to this full flowering was Stephen. His name means "crown", but not one of precious stones but a garland of many flowers. He was a crown and garland woven, not from the thorns placed on Jesus' head, but of the many virtues which are the first fruits offered by the Church to the Lord of the harvest.

As the first votive offering of the Church, the first produce of it husbandry, the laborers in the field of Gospel truth brought the holy Stephen to their Master. They treated him as a real garland of flowers because of the many virtues which were intertwined in his good works.

This exemplary Christian had been entrusted with the care of the widows. The community had attested to his trustworthiness as a person full of faith and the Holy Spirit. He was approved by the community and that choice was approved by the Apostles. Indeed, he was approved by the spiritual wisdom that he showed in deed and word.

Stephen's inspired words had already born vivid testimony to the message that he was proclaiming. His preaching was accompanied by signs of divine power. Stephen, it is written, "*was filled with grace and power, and did great wonders and signs*". In fact, he didn't look upon the ministry he was assigned toward Greek-speaking widows as a hindrance to his preaching. He undertook this labor without abandoning the ministry of the word.

Think of the admiration this aroused. His was a labor-loving spirit. The care of the widows was simply another form of the care of souls. Both were of equal concern to Stephen. He distributed bread to the widows and God's word to those who had not yet believed in Christ. He provided material food as well as spiritual nourishment.

These are the signs that point to a good person of true faith. He was indeed filled with the Holy Spirit. He not only fulfilled the task of serving the poor with integrity but reduced the enemies of the Gospel to silence by his powerful words. He practiced a true boldness of speech through the power of the Holy Spirit dwelling within him.

Whatever tasks you may have been given within the community of faith, approach them as Stephen did. You too will witness to the Gospel and its truth, both by words and by the deeds of love. That is the sign of God dwelling and working within you. Do not let any opportunity slip by. Look for the needs of others and discover ways to help them.

THE FRUITS OF CONTEMPLATION

A reflection taken from a sermon by St. Bede the Venerable

John, whom we celebrate today, was especially loved by Jesus. One sign of this was his being next to his Master's chest as they ate the Last Supper. But it was not just a sign of present love; it prefigured a future mystery by which he would write that Gospel which includes the hidden mysteries more fully than any other. In Jesus' breast "*are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge*". John wrote very little about Jesus' human activities and applied himself to speaking of the hidden mysteries of his divine nature.

Now in the Acts of the Apostles it is found that he was scourged with the rest of the apostles and went forth rejoicing with them. It is told in Church History that the emperor Domitian put him into a tub of boiling oil and that he came out untouched and not long after this he was banished to the island of Patmos. He was not victorious over the world without struggle but legend says that he died a natural death without special struggle or pain.

Mystically speaking, we can take all this as designating the two ways of life in the Church, namely the active and the contemplative. Few ascend to the contemplative and only after perfection in good deeds. The active life in Christ requires one to be zealous in devoting oneself to righteous labors, to keeping oneself unspotted by this world, keeping one's mind and hand and tongue from every stain associated with temptation, and subjecting oneself to divine service. Then he comes to the aid of neighbors in need and by struggling for justice even to the point of death.

The contemplative life begins when one has been taught by the long practice of good deeds instructed by prolonged prayer and habitual tears and by showing the way of truth to the erring. One directs the eye of the mind toward love alone. Then one begins to get a foretaste of the joy of perpetual blessedness, and desiring it ardently and even in sublime mental ecstasy. If one has lived long cut off from human consolations.

Contemplative happiness will be made perfect, however, only in the presence of the citizens of heaven and the Lord. John, however, when he returned from exile under Domitian was asked by the bishops to write something about the sublime realities because of heretics who had arisen during the persecution. We are told that he asked all to fast and pray for him and then understood to write his Gospel. "*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God.*" He taught that just as our Lord Jesus Christ was a true human being, so also was he true God.

Therefore, because we, with all the faithful, know that his testimony is true, let us in all things, by understanding what he taught with right faith, and carrying it out with right works, take care to come to the undying gifts which he promised through our Lord Jesus Christ. These are not only the prelude to contemplation but its fruits. The truth that we contemplate we share with all who come to us seeking a closer relation to the Lord Jesus.

THE SLAUGHTER OF THE INNOCENTS

A reflection from a letter by Fr. Alfred Delp

The children of Bethlehem share the proclamation of the Gospel with our Lord. The mystery of the words “*all this happened because the Lord came*” apply particularly to them. They weren’t martyred because of the power of a frightened and insane tyrant; that is made quite clear. We see how completely all life is in the hands of our Lord. It is not mere pious sentiment to call the Holy Child, Kyrios—Lord. Our conception of God must retain its grandeur and become even firmer. Then the love we profess will also be strong, 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 their part in the militant dialogue between God and anti-God in which they are caught up gained them heaven.

But we seem to have lost our awareness of that ceaseless duel; we so little realize that we have a share in this struggle that we ignore it completely. Yet no one can escape responsibility, and at any moment God, exercising a sovereign power, may draw us into the thick of things. 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 manger sealed their fate and was sacrifice enough. That is the mystery.

How many are the innocent who die today, by wars and oppression and all sorts of deliberately human-made catastrophes. This is not only a mystery; it is a message and a judgment.

We have become insensitive to the sovereignty of God. Even where awareness of it exists still, a clear conception of the relationship and of the order to which it belongs is lacking. The God under whose inexorable law we exist has been dissolved in a mist of psychological out-pourings, subjective evaluations of living conditions, or beliefs about collective needs. This is one of the evils of our time.

Do you believe that God has the innocent in his sovereign care? We can only bow before this mystery. It is a mystery of grace. No one, after all, earns salvation. It is a free gift and requires nothing but acceptance of the gift. We too must be prepared to accept that fact, and the gift, together with the God who is the gift. This is what we celebrate at Christmas as we remember all those innocents who have been slain out of rejection of God and God’s plan, right from the beginnings of the order we would create apart from God but for the world we would make of God’s creation.

