

THE FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT & CHRISTMAS DAY

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Sunday

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.

Monday

THE KEY THAT OPENS OUR EYES TO SEE GOD

A reflection developed from “Against Heresies” by St. Irenaeus of Lyon

There is one God. This God, by a divine Word and divine Wisdom, made all things. This God set all things in order. The Word by which God did this is Our Lord, Jesus Christ. In these “last days” the Only Son became human, and one of us, with the goal of uniting the beginning, God, with the end, the last of God’s creations, humankind.

The prophets received the gift of speaking God’s word so that they could foretell the coming of that Word, and through him the union and communion of God and humankind. It was the Heavenly Father’s will to do this. From the beginning, it had been prophesied that human beings would “see” God. Not only would we see God but God would live with them on earth and talk with them.

God was to be with humankind for our salvation. Making himself known to us, we would find ourselves freed from the hands of all who hate us; i.e., from every evil spirit. We would become able to serve God in holiness and righteousness all our days. This would be brought about through the reception of God’s Spirit, who would bring us to the glory of the Heavenly Father.

The accomplishment of this divine design, as proclaimed by the prophets, would make it possible for mankind to see God. This promise is echoed by our Lord: “*Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God*”. Yet hadn’t God said to Moses, “*No one shall see God and live*”? The Heavenly Father is inexpressible in glory and incomprehensible. In love and gentleness God grants even this—to those who love him.

God can do all things! We are allowed to see God, even as the prophets had foretold. “For what is impossible for human beings is possible for God!” Of course, no human being can see God by merely human powers. But if it is God’s will that human beings see God then it is possible. Of course, it is accomplished as God wills and when God wills.

It begins when God reveals something of himself through prophecy. Then more is revealed through the Son. We are now “sons” by adoption, and so share what the Son promises us through the Heavenly Father’s will. The process is completed in the Kingdom of Heaven. There God will show us the divine being as it is and so show us our Heavenly Father. Eternal life comes to all in thus “seeing” God.

Just as those who see the light are within it, bathed in its brightness, so those who see God are within God and bathed in God’s glory. To share that glory is to “see” God. That makes seeing God the entrance into life. The Spirit prepares us for the Son and the Son leads us to the Heavenly Father. The Father frees us from all change and decay and thus leads us into the very divine being. But keep it clearly in mind that the key to receiving this gift is receiving the Son. That is why we welcome Our Lord Jesus Christ with such gratitude and joy!

Tuesday

MAGNIFY THE DAWN WHO COMES FROM ON HIGH

A reflection developed from St. Bede's commentary on Luke's Gospel

"My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit exults in God my savior!" The Lord, Mary tells us, has honored her with a unique and sublime task. Even the love one bears for the Lord is of little help in understanding what is asked, of her and of us. We must, then, do what Mary did. We must continually praise and thank our God with all our heart, using all our powers of discernment in contemplating the greatness of the One who had come to us from on high, come bringing light to the entire world and beginning the new and final day of creation. Gladly will we join Mary in being God's servant. To us has been given a Savior, Jesus. He will be the fruit of our lives as he was the fruit of Mary's womb.

"The almighty has done great things for me and holy is his Name." Only one for whom God has done great things can magnify God in a worthy way. That is why Mary invited us to join our praise to her praise. Here we see that one who knows who God is and has such esteem for God as to proclaim God's greatness to the very best of one's ability will enter the Kingdom of God. But such a one wants to enter the Kingdom as the least.

God has come to the help of Israel, his servant, and it is not any one of us who has brought that about. It is done by the Son, born for us in Jesus, the Christ. Who are we in comparison? Mary speaks of herself as the slave of the Lord, and says this happily and in gratitude. It is, after all, from the Lord that we receive our obedient and humble savior, and it is from him that we learn obedience and humility. If one has no regard for humility then one is quite beyond redemption. We couldn't say, with the prophet that God is my helper who upholds my life; I humble myself and become like a little child. One who says this in truth shall be the greater in the Kingdom of Heaven.

In magnifying the Lord, Mary speaks most properly of her spiritual rather than of her physical descent from Abraham. All those can share in her praise and so give thanks—whether Abraham's physical descendants or not, have inherited the faith of Abraham. It was his faith that justifies and it is our faith that makes us Abraham's co-inheritors. This was why the promise of a future savior was made to Abraham and his descendants.

The Lord's mother, together with John the Baptist's mother, bore eloquent witness to what is in store for us. All good things come to pass through their obedience, just as through disobedience all bad things came about. Now it is through a faith like Mary's that life comes to the world. Rejoice in the Lord Jesus, who has risen for us like the dawn of a new day and its new light! Receive this gift and become a lampstand to give light to all those you encounter. Show them the gift of praise and gratitude and humble serve you have receive and live in imitation of Mary and of her Son. Let the light of Christ shine through you to bring joy to the world.

Wednesday

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 stronghold, 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.

Thursday

HOW WE PREPARE THE WAY FOR THE LORD

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

“Prepare a way for the Lord!” Reflect carefully that we prepare the way of the Lord as we are bidden to by walking along it. We can do this only by preparing it. However, far you have journeyed along it the way is always waiting to be prepared, so you must start afresh from the place you have reached and then advance. We are led to do this because at every stage we meet the Lord for whose coming we are preparing, and each time you see him in a completely new way, and as a much greater figure than we have met before. The psalm has it right when it leads us to pray: Set your way before me, Lord, make it my law and I will always go on seeking you.

What we seek is eternal life. Though we can study the route ahead and can determine just how far we can go, yet such is the nature of goodness that there is no real limit to how far we can go—if we go with the Lord. So when we, as wise and indefatigable travelers, reach a goal we have set for ourselves we forget what was behind and start over again! “Now I begin again!”, we say to ourselves.

Nothing should deter us from pursuing the way of God’s commandments. We can understand the beginning of this Way only after we have begun to walk it. It is a narrow way, just as the Lord describes, and woe to all that so few find it. So many go astray in the wilderness! They are the persons who are proud and think they can walk the way on their own.

We have to walk with the Lord. We have to fear God first of all. It is this fear of the Lord that is the beginning of wisdom. If the beginning of wisdom, certainly it is the beginning of the way that is goodness. It is that wisdom which counsels us: “I have considered my ways and turned my path to your decrees, Lord”. We begin with praise and by turning from our own paths to that of the Lord. Let us help one another begin each day by again turning to the Lord and the Lord’s Way.

If you are on the way then fear only one thing, that you might leave it. Never offend the Lord who leads you all the Way. You don’t want to be abandoned and left to wander in the ways of your own heart. If you feel that the way is too narrow then look to its end. If you could see how every goal is to be attained you would find yourself saying, “Broad indeed is your command, Lord”! If you can’t see that far, then believe Isaiah. Behold, he says, the redeemed shall walk by this way and the ransomed of the Lord shall turn and come to the Lord’s House singing. An everlasting joy shall be theirs and joy and gladness.

One who meditates adequately on this goal will, I think, not only find the Way easy but will grow wings so as no longer to walk but fly. Always, then, bear in mind the wonderful things that await you and run eagerly with all your might, along the way of God’s commandments. May that One who is the path of those who run, and the reward of those who reach the goal, lead and guide us along this Way. The way and the goal is Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever.

Friday

A CHRISTMAS EVE SERMON

Pope St Leo the Great

Tomorrow is the day our Savior is born: what a joy for us, my beloved. This is no season for sadness, this, the birthday of life- the life which annihilates the fear of death, and engenders joy, promising, as it does, immortality.

Nobody is an outsider to this happiness. The same cause for joy is common to all, for as Our Lord found nobody free from guilt when he came to bring an end to death and sin, so he came with redemption for all. Let the saints rejoice for they hasten towards their crown; let the sinner be filled with joy, for pardon is freely offered; let the Gentiles be emboldened, for they are called to life.

When the designated time had come, which God in his deep and impenetrable plan had fixed upon, God's Son took human nature in order to reconcile us to our Creator. Thus, would the devil, the father of death, be himself overcome by that self-same human nature which he had overcome.

Tomorrow we see the angels exult at the birth of the Lord: they sing "Glory to God in high heaven"; they announce peace for all men and women. How greatly should we rejoice at this mysterious undertaking of divine love, when the angels on high thrill so much at it!

My beloved, let us offer thanks to God the Father, through his Son, in the Holy Spirit. In the great mercy with which he loved us, he had pity on us, and gave us life, so that we would be a new creation, a new work of his hands.

Let us then quit of the old self and the habits that went with it. Sharers now in the birth of Christ, let us break with the deeds of the flesh.

O Christian, be aware of your nobility- it is God's own nature that you share: do not then, by an ignoble life, fall into your former baseness. Think of the Head, think of the Body of which you are a member. Recall that you have been rescued from the power of darkness, and have been transferred to the light of God. Rejoice! Celebrate!

Saturday

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 any-thing 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.