

THE FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT

Sun. The Fourth Sunday of Advent: O Adonai (O Lord of Israel)
18 **GOD BRINGS RIGHT OUT OF WRONG**
A reflection developed from a text by Carroll Stuhlmueller

Mon Late Advent: O Radix Jesse (O Root of Jesse)
19 **HOPING AGAINST HOPE**
A reflection developed from a text by Carroll Stuhlmueller

Tues. Late Advent: O Clavis David (O Key of David)
20 **A CHRISTIAN'S COMPASSION**
A reflection from a sermon by St. Gregory Nazianzen

Wed. Late Advent: O Oriens (O Radiant Dawn)
21 **THE GIFT THAT IS PRAYER**
A reflection from Tertullian's Treatise on Prayer

Thurs. Late Advent: O Rex Gentium (O King of All Nations)
22 **RUNNING TO MEET OUR KING**
A reflection taken from a sermon by Bl. Gueric of Igny

Fri. Late Advent: O Emmanuel (O God-With-Us)
23 **CHRIST IS BORN IN US**
A reflection from a sermon by Martin Luther

Sat. THE VIGIL OF CHRISTMAS
24 **THE WORLD INTO WHICH CHRIST COMES**
A reflection by Giovanni Papini

Sunday

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.

Monday

HOPING AGAINST HOPE

A reflection developed from a text by Fr. Carroll Stuhlmüller

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

Tuesday

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 goodwill. "*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 those who are 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 for 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.

Wednesday

THE GIFT THAT IS PRAYER

A reflection from Tertullian's Treatise on Prayer

Once, the commonest form of worshipping God was a sacrifice. But our God doesn't ask for 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 seeks 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 not think 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 bears more 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 that 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, freeing people from demons and freeing the 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.

Thursday

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, though 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 forever and ever.

Friday

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 everything 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 so 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.

Saturday

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 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 its 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 ever born into this world. The Son of Man was born here—only to be devoured by wild beasts 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 created 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.