

THE SECOND WEEK OF ADVENT

(2023-2024)

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 From the General Audience Address of Pope JOHN PAUL II, 10 April 2002

Sunday

FACING THE FACT OF GOD'S PLAN

A Reflection taken from a Sermon by St. Augustine

The Lord Jesus began his preaching of the Gospel with the warning: *"Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand!"* His forerunner, John the Baptist, began his preaching in the same way: *"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand"*. The warning today is the same, at least for those who have not been willing to repent. Perhaps they don't feel the urgency of the approach of the Kingdom of Heaven. Perhaps they don't experience its coming. But the Lord Jesus himself points out, *"You can't expect to see the Kingdom of Heaven coming; the Kingdom of Heaven"*, he adds in another place in the Gospel, *"is within you!"*

The Lord rebuked people who wouldn't believe by pointing out that they were deliberately refusing to use a skill they already had. He reminded them that they were skillful enough at reading weather signs and could tell when good or bad weather was coming. Why were they unwilling to face the fact that God's Kingdom was coming? They had seen the signs that were John the Baptist and Jesus! What did they say?

All of us would show ourselves wise if we took Jesus' warning to heart. He should be our teacher, and if we let him teach us we won't waste the present opportunity. The Savior offers us mercy right now; God continues to spare our race despite all the wrongs we do. Why does he spare us? He hopes of our conversion, for our turning to him! God doesn't want anyone to be damned.

Are you concerned about the final end of our world? Properly, that is God's concern. Faith is our concern right now! I don't know whether any of us will see the end of the world. Very likely none of us will. Yet the time is very near for all and each of us. Why do I say this? I say it because we are all mortal. We face all sorts of hazards. Think of how fragile a piece of beautiful glassware is. Yet if it is kept safe it can last indefinitely. The point is that it is exposed to the danger of accidents but it isn't liable to old age or the suffering that comes with it, and we are!

In a sense, we are more fragile than glass. We discover how fragile we are when we get sick. In our weakness, we worry about all sorts of calamities that might come upon us. Maybe none has come and maybe none of them will, but time is marching on. No matter how many misfortunes a person may avoid or escape no one escapes or avoids death. For you, the day of your death will be the end of the world.

If you escape every illness or misfortune—all dangers from without, you can't escape those that come from within your very humanity. The danger of death comes from within even if not from without. Suddenly one is attacked by some weakness or malady that goes with old age. Even if one is spared, the weakness that will carry one off to God comes with the passing of the years. Nothing can delay it beyond what God's Providence disposes.

Repent! Turn to God and let God be the center of your living and loving and hoping. The Lord Jesus has told us what we must do. We must love one another just as he has loved us. He doesn't call you to simply contemplate death's coming. He calls you to love, and to do it actively, and to find a way to make whatever you do a deed of love. That is the life of God's Kingdom already springing up within you. The Kingdom is within you! Allow it be your whole life and you will find life is a joy—even at the hour of your death when you stretch out your hands to God's loving embrace.

Monday

FROM THE GENERAL AUDIENCE ADDRESS OF POPE JOHN PAUL II 18 December 2002

1. In this season of Advent, the invitation of the Prophet Isaiah accompanies us: "*Say to those who are fearful of heart. Be strong, fear not! Behold, your God ... will come and save you*" (Is 35,4). It becomes more urgent as Christmas approaches, enriched with the exhortation to *prepare our hearts to welcome* the Messiah. The one awaited by the people *will certainly come* and his salvation will be for all.

On the Holy Night, we will again recall his birth in Bethlehem, in a certain sense, we will relive the feelings of the shepherds, their joy and their wonder. With Mary and Joseph, we will contemplate the glory of the Word made flesh for our redemption. We will pray that all men may accept the new life that the Son of Man brought into the world by assuming our human nature.

2. The liturgy of Advent, filled with constant allusions to the joyful expectation of the Messiah, helps us to *understand the fullness of the value and meaning* of the mystery of Christmas. It is not just about commemorating the historical event, which occurred some 2,000 years ago in a little village of Judea. Instead, we must understand that *our whole life should be an "advent"*, in vigilant expectation of Christ's final coming. To prepare our hearts to welcome the Lord who, as we say in the Creed, will come one day to judge the living and the dead, we must learn to recognize his presence in the events of daily life. Advent is then a *period of intense training* that directs us decisively to the One who has already come, who will come and who continuously comes.

3. With these sentiments, the Church prepares to contemplate in ecstasy, in a week, *the mystery of the Incarnation*. The Gospel recounts the conception and birth of Jesus, and reports the many providential circumstances that preceded and surrounded such a miraculous event: the angel's annunciation to Mary, the birth of John the Baptist, the choir of angels in Bethlehem, the arrival of the Magi from the East, St Joseph's visions. These are all signs and witnesses that highlight the divinity of this Child. In Bethlehem is born Emmanuel, God-with-us.

In the liturgy of these days, the Church offers us three *outstanding "guides"* to show us the proper attitude to assume in going to meet the divine "guest" of humanity.

4. First of all, Isaiah, the prophet of consolation and hope. He proclaims a true and proper Gospel for the people of Israel, enslaved in Babylon, and *urges them to remain vigilant in prayer*, to recognize "the signs" of the coming of the Messiah.

Then there is *John the Baptist*, the precursor of the Messiah, who is presented as a "voice crying in the wilderness", preaching "*a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins*" (cf. Mk 1,4). It is the only condition for recognizing the Messiah already present in the world.

Finally, *Mary*, who in this novena of preparation for Christmas, guides us toward Bethlehem. Mary is the *Woman of the "yes"* who, contrary to Eve, makes the plan of God her own without reservation. Thus she becomes a *clear light* for our steps and *the highest model* for our inspiration.

Tuesday

THE SIGNS OF SALVATION

A Reflection developed from a text of Journeying with the Lord by Carlo Cardinal Martini

God has given himself to the world through signs and wonders. “In the beginning was the Word”; it was not human searching or human effort to go to God that brought salvation. The beginning is God who through visible signs makes himself known to human minds and hearts, and to those who search. The fullness of self-awareness is an awareness of the need to know what God says. That means knowing what God manifests through the signs of divine Will. Human persons are hearers of God’s word and find fulfillment by putting themselves and their lives totally in an attitude of listening to the word of God as manifested in Jesus.

Jesus came to us through Mary; i.e., through a person formed by Jewish cult and culture and history. But Jesus didn’t come for Jews alone and so he had to make God’s word known to Greco-Roman peoples as well. If you read the opening chapters of the Gospel according to St. Luke you will see how the Jewish story of God’s incarnation was retold for a Greco-Roman audience. These people, after all, were called to share fully in God’s promise of salvation but couldn’t hear the promise if spoken only in Jewish cultural ways of speaking.

What God says to us through Mary, by her role in the incarnation is so important that there have been what we call Marian apparitions all over the world. When we celebrate the Feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe, we recall one of these, and the message God gave to the Native American peoples through Mary. The words were in a Native American language and in their “picture writing,” and were expressed using the forms of courtesy and piety of Native Americans. Mary appears as one of them and builds a cultural bridge between them and Europe by giving St. Juan Diego, a Native American, Castilian roses. A flower, in picture writing, is a word. The word was first for the Bishop of Mexico City because this kind of rose was native to Mexico. It was picked from a miraculous rosebush on Tepeyac hill to persuade the bishop to let a chapel be built on that hill. Even more persuasive to all was the word written on Juan Diego’s tilma, the picture of Mary as a Native American.

The chapel was a place to display that “word” to Native American peoples. In many of their languages, an unexpected opportunity is called “a flower of God”. That is what Mary was for them. St. Juan Diego was chosen to cultivate the flower as the centerpiece of the chapel. Mary said to Juan Diego just what Jesus said to us all on the cross—Mary is your mother. She added that she would show Native American people God’s love for them. She began by showing them the respect of speaking their language, wearing their clothes and using their form of writing. Mary really knew her Native American cultural anthropology!

Advent is a time dedicated to sharing the Gospel; i.e., to sharing God’s word as we have personally heard it. It is also a time for speaking of the signs and wonders God has worked for us and for our own people. We are to speak it in a language, perhaps a kind of sign language, which those with whom we share can understand in a way that penetrates their hearts. St. Juan Diego—who had been the equivalent of a Knight in Aztec society and culture—spent the remainder of his life explaining God’s message, given through the sign of the Virgin who bears a child, to all the Native Americans who came to the little church to see God’s word and sign to them. They turned to God by the thousands. We have the same task, and who knows what wonders God will work through us.

Wednesday

ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS POPE FRANCIS

On the Occasion of the Feast of Saint Lucy, 13 December 2014

I would thus like to mention several human values that the example of St Lucy offers us. I underline: human values. Lucy lived them in an exemplary fashion thanks to her faith in Christ, but they can be shared by all.

First of all, Lucy reminds us of a value that seems to me very important for you too: *courage*. She was a young defenseless woman, however she faced torture and a violent death with great courage, a courage that came to her from the Risen Christ, with whom she was united, and from the Holy Spirit, who dwelt within her.

We all need courage to face the trials of life. People who are blind and visually impaired are in special need of this, so as not to close within themselves or assume the attitude of a victim. On the contrary, they must open themselves to reality, to others and to society to learn to understand and appreciate the abilities that the Lord has placed in each one of us, truly in everyone, without exception! This, however, takes courage, and strength of spirit. Therefore, another value that St Lucy brings to mind is the fact that she *was not alone*, but *she belonged to a community*, she was a member of a body of which Christ is the Head, a stone in a building which has Christ as its foundation. This aspect is also reflected in human terms. You are an association, and this is a value! An association is not the sum of individuals, it is much more. Today there is a great need to experience the associative aspect with joy and commitment, because this moment of history is "at a low ebb", and it's not felt strongly. Be a group, work in solidarity, meet together, share your experiences, share your resources... this is all part of the civic heritage of a people. Often people who live with disadvantages or disabilities can say from their experience to everyone: we are not "monads", we are not meant to be isolated but to form relationships together, to complete each other, help each other, stand together, and support each other. The presence of disabled people prompts everyone to form a community or rather, to be a community, that we accept one another with our limitations. Because everyone has abilities, but everyone has limitations too!

Lastly, Lucy tells us that life is made to be given. She lived this out in the supreme form of martyrdom, but the value of *the gift of self* is universal; it is the secret to true happiness. Man does not become completely fulfilled by having or by doing. One is fulfilled by loving, i.e. by giving of oneself. This can also be understood as the secret of the name "Lucy": a person is "full of light" to the extent that he or she is a gift to others. In reality, every person is a gift, he or she is a precious gift!

Dear friends, living according to these values today can also bring about misunderstanding; it's tiring to go against the current, but this is not surprising. Testimony always requires paying in the person. Modern societies that focus chiefly on the rights of the "individual" risk forgetting the importance of the community and that of the free gift of self to others. Thus there is still a need to fight, relying on the example and intercession of St Lucy! I hope you do so with courage and with the joy of doing it together.

Thursday

HOW FAITH LEADS TO PERFECTION

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

Sometimes, beginners in the spiritual life make little of their faults. At other times they become over-concerned with them. Such people are in danger of falling into themselves. On the other hand, 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 all 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. To do that is to want peace rather than God. If God did take away imperfections such people would likely become proud and even presumptuous.

There are persons who 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. Those who seek praise prefer 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 know what they are actually just learning.

Those who are going in the right direction have no desire to be anyone's master but are rather very ready to set out on any road other than their own if 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.

Friday

WITHOUT FEAR OF FREEDOM

From the Morning Meditation of Pope Francis, 13 December 2013

Pope Francis commented on the Gospel of St Matthew (11:16-19), in which Jesus compares the generation of his contemporaries to “children sitting in the marketplaces and calling to their playmates: ‘We piped to you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not mourn’”.

The Pope recalled that in the Gospels Jesus “always speaks fondly of children”, he offers them as “models of Christian life” and he invites us “to be like them in order to enter into the Kingdom of God”. Today’s Gospel passage “is the only instance in which he does not speak well of them”. The Pope called the image “a bit particular”; the children are “ill-mannered, malcontent, even coarse, ever refusing the invitations of the others: nothing suits them”. Jesus uses this image to describe “the leaders of the people,” whom the Holy Father called “people who were not open to the God’s word”.

A point of interest for the Holy Father: they did not refuse “the message, but the messenger”. As we read further on in the same passage: “John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say ‘Behold, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!’”. In practice, men have always found reason to delegitimize the preacher. Just think of the people of that time, Pope Francis said, who preferred “to escape into a more elaborate religion: in moral precepts like the Pharisees, in political compromise like the Sadducees, in a social revolution like the zealots, in gnostic spirituality like the Essenes”. “All of them,” he added, “had their well cleaned, well-ordered system,” but they did not accept “the preacher”. That is why Jesus refreshes their memory by recalling the prophets who were persecuted and killed.

To accept “the truth of Revelation” and not “the preacher” reveals a mentality that comes from “a life caged in precepts, compromises, revolutionary plans, in a disincarnate spirituality”. Pope Francis referred particularly to those Christians “who do not allow themselves to dance when the preacher gives them the good news of joy, who do not allow themselves to cry when the preacher gives them sad news”; i.e., to those Christians “who are closed, caged, who are not free for fear of the freedom of the Holy Spirit that comes through preaching”.

The Pope continued: “This is the scandal of preaching of which St Paul spoke; the scandal of preaching that ends in the scandal of the Cross”. In fact, he added, “it is scandalous that God should speak to us through limited, sinful men; and it is even more scandalous that God should speak to us and save us through a man who says he is the Son of God, but ends like a criminal”. “These sad Christians do not believe in the Holy Spirit; they do not believe in that freedom that comes through preaching, that admonishes you, that teaches you, that even smacks you around a bit, but it is freedom which makes the Church grow”.

Therefore, the Gospel image of the “children who are afraid to dance and cry” and who “are afraid of everything, who ask to be assured about everything” reminds us of “those sad Christians, who are always criticizing preachers of truth because they are afraid to open the door to the Holy Spirit”. Pope Francis concluded his homily by exhorting all those present to pray for them and everyone, so that “we do not become sad Christians”, who rob “the Holy Spirit of the freedom of coming among us through the scandal of preaching”.

Saturday

PSALM 79[80] O SHEPHERD OF ISRAEL, COME TO OUR AID! **From the General Audience Address of Pope JOHN PAUL II, 10 April 2002**

Psalm 79 (80) is a song of lament, a plea from the entire people of Israel. The first part makes use of a famous biblical symbol, the shepherd. The Lord is invoked as "the shepherd of Israel", who "leads Joseph like a flock" (Ps 79,2). From high above the Ark of the Covenant, enthroned among the cherubim, the Lord guides his flock, that is, his people, and protects them in danger.

He did this during the crossing of the desert. Now, however, he seems absent, as though asleep or indifferent. He feeds the flock he must lead and nourish (cf. Ps 22) only with the bread of tears (cf. Ps 79[80],6). Enemies scoff at this humiliated, despised people; yet God does not seem to be moved nor "to be stirred up" (v. 3), nor does he reveal his might, arrayed to defend the victims of violence and oppression. The repetition of the antiphonal invocation (cf. vv. 4,8), seeks virtually to rouse God from his detached attitude so that he will return to be the shepherd and defender of his people.

In the second part of the prayer, full of tension and charged with trust, we find another symbol dear to the Bible: the vine. It is an image easy to understand because it belongs to the vision of the Promised Land and is a sign of fruitfulness and joy.

But this splendid flourishing was shattered. The Psalm reminds us that a tempest struck God's vineyard: in other words, Israel suffered a harsh trial, a brutal invasion that devastated the Promised Land. As though he were an invader, God himself broke down the walls surrounding the vineyard, letting the plunderers break in who are represented by the wild boar, held by an ancient tradition to be a fierce and impure animal,.. the symbol of an enemy horde that ravages everything (cf. vv. 13-14).

The Psalmist then directs a pressing appeal to God to come back and defend the victims, to break his silence: "Turn again, O God of hosts! Look down from heaven, and see; have regard for this vine" (v. 15). God will again be the defender of the vital stump of this vine, subjected to such a violent storm, and will scatter all those who have tried to tear it up or set fire to it (cf. vv. 16-17).

At this point, the Psalm opens to messianic hope. Indeed, in verse 18 the Psalmist prays: "Let your hand be upon the man of your right hand, the son of man whom you have made strong for yourself!". Perhaps his first thought is of the Davidic king who, with the Lord's help, will lead the uprising for freedom. But confidence in the future Messiah is implicit, that "Son of Man" who would be sung by the Prophet Daniel (cf. 7,13-14), a title Jesus would choose as his favorite to define his work and messianic being. Indeed, the Fathers of the Church were unanimous in pointing out that the vine that the psalm describes is a prophetic prefiguration of Christ "the true vine" (Jn 15,1), and of his Church.

Of course, if the face of the Lord is to shine once again, Israel must be converted through fidelity and prayer to God Our Savior. This is what the Psalmist says, when he declares: "Then we will never withdraw from you" (Ps 79[80],19).

So Psalm 79[80] is a song that is strongly marked by suffering but also by indestructible trust. God is always ready to "return" to his people, but his people must also "return" to him in fidelity. If we turn away from sin, the Lord will be "converted" from his intention to punish: this is the Psalmist's conviction that finds an echo in our hearts and opens them to hope.