

**THE FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT
&
THE SOLEMNITY OF THE NATIVITY OF THE LORD
The Christmas Week**

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Sunday

THE PAPAL ANGELUS MESSAGE

On The Fourth Sunday of Advent by Pope Francis, 24 December 2017

This Sunday just before Christmas, we listen to the Gospel of the Annunciation (*cf. Lk 1:26-38*).

In this Gospel passage, we notice a contrast between the promises of the angel and Mary's response. This contrast is manifested in the *dimension* and *content* of the expressions of the two protagonists. The angel says to Mary: "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High; and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever" (*vv. 30-33*). It is a *long* revelation that opens unprecedented possibilities. The Child that will be born to this humble girl from Nazareth will be called Son of the Most High. It is not possible to conceive of a higher dignity than this. And after Mary's question in which she asks for an explanation, the angel's revelation becomes even more detailed and surprising.

On the other hand, Mary's reply is a *short* sentence that does not speak of glory. It does not speak of privilege but only of willingness and service: "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word" (*v. 38*). The *content* is also different. Mary does not exalt herself before the prospect of becoming the mother of the Messiah, but rather remains modest and expresses her acceptance of the Lord's plan. Mary does not boast. She is humble and modest. She always remains the same.

This contrast is meaningful. It makes us understand that Mary is truly humble and does not try to be noticed. She recognizes that she is small before God and she is happy to be so. At the same time, she is aware that the fulfillment of God's plan depends on her response, and that therefore she is called to accept it with her whole being.

In this circumstance, Mary's behavior corresponds perfectly to that of the Son of God when he comes into the world. He wants to become the Servant of the Lord, to put himself at the service of humanity to fulfill the Father's plan. Mary says: "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord"; and the Son of God upon entering the world says: "Lo, I have come to do thy will, O God" (*Heb 10:7*). Mary's attitude fully mirrors this statement by the Son of God who also becomes the son of Mary. Thus Our Lady shows that she is in perfect accord with God's plan. Furthermore, she reveals herself as a disciple of his Son, and in the *Magnificat*, she will be able to proclaim that God has "exalted those of low degree" (*Lk 1:52*) because, with her humble and generous response, she has obtained great joy and also great glory.

As we admire our Mother for this response to God's call to mission, we ask her to help each of us to welcome God's plan into our lives with sincere humility and brave generosity.

Monday

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 news 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 goodwill”. 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.

Tuesday

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 shone out as a witness to the truth. In his company all those who witnessed to God's great plan of salvation shone 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 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.

Wednesday

THE FRUITS OF CONTEMPLATION

A Reflection 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, 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 struggles 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 also its fruits. The truth that we contemplate we share with all who come to us seeking a closer relation to the Lord Jesus.

Thursday

THE SLAUGHTER OF INNOCENTS

A Reflection by Fr. Alfred Delp, SJ

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 outpourings, 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.

Friday

LEARNING TO TREASURE GOD'S GIFTS TO US

A Reflection taken from a Sermon by St. Bernard

The goodness and humanity of God our Savior have appeared. Let us give thanks to God for such a great consolation amid a life that seems so unhappy and wandering, seems an exile. Before the humanity of God appeared, God's goodness was concealed. Of course, God was always good—for God's mercy is forever—but how were people to know that? People had no faith in promises that weren't confirmed by their own experience. The Lord had spoken through the prophets in many different ways and assured us that he was thinking thoughts of peace and not of affliction. But people were too aware of their afflictions to notice the rest. Now, at last, God has given evidence of the most convincing kind, for we do at least believe our own eyes.

God has come to live with us. What do we see now? Peace hasn't been only promised but has been sent; it is peace with God and with ourselves. What was promised has been given and more than we expected. It is as though God had sent a bulging purse down from heaven and then let it be torn open in Christ's passion—and behold it contained the price of our redemption and reconciliation.

It seemed only a small purse but it was very full. *"Unto us a child is given"*. It is a child but one in whom dwells all the fullness of the Godhead and of humanity. When the fullness of time came, then the fullness of the Godhead came and also recognition of the gift of humanity.

God came in a human body because only in this way could he show himself to those who live in the flesh and are flesh and blood. That was true from the beginning. By the sight of our humanity made God's own we can be convinced of God's goodness and of the goodness of his gift of humanity. God has taken my human nature. God has assumed not only my misery but my humanity. That demonstrates the depths of his compassion and the depth of his goodness—in redemption and in creation.

"O Lord, what is man that you are mindful of us? Why should you set your heart on us?" This ought to make us stop and think. We should realize how much God cares for us. It should teach us how God thinks of us and our humanity. It should teach us how God feels for us. We mustn't draw conclusions only from our own sufferings but remember God's humanity and God's sufferings. We must learn from what he became for our sakes how highly we have been exalted. God's humanity will be a revelation of his goodness to us.

Truly great is the goodness of God, and it is manifest in his humanity. We learn about its goodness through him. He has given us the most positive proof of goodness by the pains he took both to enrich our humanity and to add his divine dignity to it.

Saturday

CHRIST'S HISTORY AND OUR OWN

A Reflection by Fr. Gustavo Gutierrez, OP

The Gospel of Luke tells us that “In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that the whole world should be enrolled.” This simple text conveys a profound message. Jesus was born in a particular place at a particular time and under Emperor Octavius, who had himself renamed Augustus when he reached the pinnacle of his power. It was also during the reign of Herod, a traitor to his people who had sold out to the occupying power. It was during this time that Jesus was born, a person of no importance in the eyes of the cynical and arrogant authorities. He was born in Bethlehem, “one of the little clans of Judah”, where at birth he was surrounded by shepherds and their flocks. His parents had come to a stable after vainly knocking at numerous doors. There, on the fringes of society, the Word became history, contingency, solidarity and weakness. But we can also say that by this, history itself, our history, became Word.

It is often said at Christmas that Jesus is born into every family and every heart. But this mustn't make us forget the primordial, massive fact that Jesus was born of Mary among a people that at the time were dominated by the greatest empire of the age. If we forget that fact the birth of Jesus becomes an abstraction or symbol. Events lose their meaning. To the eyes of Christians, the incarnation is the irruption of God's self into human history. It is an incarnation into littleness and service amid overbearing power exercised by the mighty of this world who think they alone are important.

The Son of God was born into a little people, a nation of little importance. Further, he took flesh among the poor in a marginal area, Galilee. He lived with the poor and emerged from among them to inaugurate a kingdom of love and justice. That is why many have trouble recognizing him. The God who became flesh in Jesus is the hidden God of whom the prophets speak to us. Jesus reveals himself precisely through the anonymous people of history—those who aren't controllers of history or mighty or socially acceptable.

Christian faith is a historical faith. God is revealed in Jesus Christ and, through him, in human history and in the least important and poorest sector of those who make up our world. Only with this as a starting point can we come to God and believe in the real God. Believers can't go aside into various dead ends or corners of history and watch it go by. We must believe in the concrete settings and circumstances of our lives—even under repression and oppression and amid the struggles and hopes that are real in our time and place.

The Lord isn't intimidated by darkness or by rejection. God's light is stronger than all the shadows. If we are to dwell in God's tent, the one the Son of Man has pitched in our midst, we must enter into our own history here and now. We must nourish our hope in the will to live that we see in the poorest and most ignored. That will to live has to be transformed into a will for love and justice and for a life that will go beyond what any human power can create. Are you ready to do this? Are you ready to start now and in the circumstances that are actually your own? That is what God calls you to do.