

THE FOURTH WEEK IN ADVENT (C)

CHRISTMAS DAY

22-28 December 2024

Sun. The Fourth Sunday in Advent

Dec. 22 **THE VISITATION**

Angelus Message of Pope Benedict XVI, 23 December 2012

Mon. Late Advent Weekday: "O Emmanuel"

23 **THE WORD OF GOD IS INTIMATELY A PART OF HUMAN HISTORY
AND GUIDES IT**

From the 2007 Synod of Bishops Document The Word of God in the Life and
Mission of the Church

Tues. **THE VIGIL OF CHRISTMAS**

24 **A CHRISTMAS EVE SERMON**

By His Holiness, Pope St Leo the Great

Wed. **THE SOLEMNITY OF THE NATIVITY OF THE LORD**

25 **HOW WE MUST RECEIVE THE LORD**

A Reflection from a Sermon by St. Aelred of Rievaulx

Thurs. The Feast of St. Stephen, The First Martyr

26 **THE SORT OF PERSON STEPHEN IS**

A Reflection from a Sermon by St. Gregory of Nyssa

Fri. Feast of St. John, Apostle & Evangelist

27 **SEEING, HEARING AND TOUCHING THE WORD OF LIFE**

A Reflection from St. Augustine's Commentary on I John

Sat. Feast of the Holy Innocents

28 **THE ALL-EMBRACING LOVE OF CHRIST**

A Reflection from a Letter by St. Cyprian of Carthage

Sunday

THE VISITATION

Angelus Message of Pope Benedict XVI, 23 December 2012

On this Fourth Sunday of Advent that comes just before the Nativity of the Lord, the Gospel speaks of Mary's visit to her kinswoman Elizabeth. This event is not merely a courteous gesture but portrays with great simplicity the encounter of the Old Testament with the New. Indeed the two women, both of them then pregnant, embody expectation and the Expected One. The elderly Elizabeth symbolizes Israel which is awaiting the Messiah, whereas the young Mary bears within her the fulfillment of this expectation for the benefit of the whole of humanity.

First of all, in the two women the fruit of their wombs, John and Christ, meet and recognize each other. The Christian poet Prudentius comments: "The child imprisoned in the aged womb greets by his mother's lips his Lord, the maiden's son" (*Apotheosis*, 590: pl 59, 970). John's exultation in Elizabeth's womb is a sign of the fulfillment of the expectation: God is about to visit his People. In the Annunciation the Archangel Gabriel spoke to Mary of Elizabeth's pregnancy (cf. 1:36) as proof of God's power; in spite of her old age, her barren state was made fecund.

In her greeting to Mary Elizabeth recognizes that God's promise to humanity is being fulfilled and exclaims: "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! And why is this granted me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?" (Lk 1:42-43). In the Old Testament, the phrase "blessed are you among women" refers both to Jael (Judg 5:24), and to Judith (Jud 13:18), two women warriors who do their utmost to save Israel.

Instead, it is used here to describe Mary, a peaceful young woman who is about to bring the Saviour into the world. Thus John's leap of joy (cf. Lk 1:44) also calls to mind King David's dancing when he accompanied the entry of the Ark of the Covenant into Jerusalem (cf. 1 Chron 15:29). The Ark that contained the Tablets of the Law, the manna and Aaron's rod (cf. Heb 9:4) was the sign of God's presence among his People. The unborn John exults with joy before Mary, the Ark of the New Covenant, who in her womb is carrying Jesus, the Son of God made man.

The scene of the Visitation also expresses the beauty of the greeting. Wherever there is reciprocal acceptance, listening, making room for another, God is there, as well as the joy that comes from him. At Christmas time let us emulate Mary, visiting all those who are living in hardship, especially the sick, prisoners, the elderly and children. And let us also imitate Elizabeth who welcomes the guest as God himself: without wishing it, we shall never know the Lord, without expecting him we shall not meet him, without looking for him we shall not find him. Let us too go to meet the Lord who comes with the same joy as Mary, who went with haste to Elizabeth (Lk 1:39).

Let us pray that all men and women may seek God, discovering that it is God himself who comes to visit us first. Let us entrust our heart to Mary, Ark of the New and Eternal Covenant, so that she may make it worthy to receive God's visit in the mystery of his Birth.

Monday

THE WORD OF GOD IS INTIMATELY A PART OF HUMAN HISTORY AND GUIDES IT **From the 2007 Synod of Bishops Document The Word of God in the Life and Mission of the Church**

Persons in some cultures think that everything comes from them and as a result, consider themselves masters of their own destiny. This attitude makes it difficult for them to accept that someone might come into the world to enter into dialogue and provide the meaning of existence. Such a mentality can also be seen in often incorrect conceptions of God and various forms of doubt. God, however, who cannot silence the truth of his Word, reassures the individual that his Word is amicable and spoken for a person's good. While always respecting a person's freedom, the Word of God, nonetheless, requires a faithful listening to and meditating on its content. Truly, the Word of God "must appear to each individual as an opening to his problems, with a response to his questions, a widening of his values and together meet his aspirations." Again, we understand from *Dei Verbum* that the Word of God precedes every human word and initiative. God pronounces his Word to open a person to unexpected horizons of truth and meaning as stated in Genesis 1; John 1:1ff.; Hebrews 1:1; Romans 1:19-20; Galatians 4:4; and Colossians 1:15-17. St. Gregory the Great maintains: "Scripture comes down to our level in using our poor words, so as to allow us gradually to climb, step-by-step, from what is seen near-at-hand to things sublime."

From the start, God wanted "to make known the way leading to eternal salvation." Scripture reveals how God's Almighty Word began a dynamic dialogue with humanity from its very beginning. Oftentimes, dialogue was often dramatic, but eventually, it prevailed. In the history of God's Chosen People, Israel, the supreme Revelation took place in Jesus Christ, his Eternal Word-Made-Flesh (cf. Jn 1:14). St. Ephrem states: "I considered the Creator-Word, and likened it to the Rock that accompanied the people in the wilderness. It was not from any reservoir of water within the Rock that it poured forth glorious streams for them: there was no water in the Rock, yet oceans sprang forth from it. In like manner, the Word created things out of nothing. Blessed is that person accounted worthy to inherit your Paradise! In his book, Moses described the creation of the natural world, so that both Nature and Scripture might bear witness to the Creator: Nature, through man's use of it, and Scripture, through his reading of it. These are the witnesses which abound everywhere; they are to be found at all times, present at every hour, confuting the unbeliever, who is ungrateful towards the Creator."

The pastoral implication of this idea of the Word of God is striking. Its history is intimately intertwined with the history of humankind. In fact, it is the very basis of the history of humanity. For this reason, human history is not composed simply of human thoughts, words and initiatives. Vibrant traces of the Word of God can be seen in nature and culture. Not only does the Word give human knowledge its true value, but the human sciences themselves help reveal the Word's identity. The Word, in taking on a human nature, reveals the humanism intended from the very beginning. In a special way, the Word itself chose a people to share the path of freedom and salvation and to show the steadfastness and patience of God and his being an "Emmanuel" (Is 7:14) "God-with-us" (Is 8:10; cf. Rm 8:31; Rev 21:3). This explains how the Word of God, through biblical testimony, was reflected in the thoughts and expressions of individuals through the ages. At times, this took place in a contorted and beleaguered manner like a cry for help in the dark events of history, yet it had extraordinary effects in history as seen in an appealing manner in the lives of the saints. Living their special charisms as gifts of the Holy Spirit, they showed the inherent, fundamental potentiality of the Word of God, when taken to heart.

Tuesday

A CHRISTMAS EVE SERMON

By His Holiness, 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 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!

Wednesday

HOW WE MUST RECEIVE OUR LORD

A Reflection 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 the 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.

Thursday

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 is shown 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 the 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.

Friday

SEEING, HEARING AND TOUCHING THE WORD OF LIFE **A Reflection from St. Augustine's Commentary on I John**

"I speak of what has existed from the beginning, of what we have heard, and have seen with our own eyes; we have watched and touched it with our hands: The Word of Life." How could anyone actually touch The Word unless it had been made flesh and come to dwell among us? But this Word, which was made flesh and has dwelt among us, could be touched and still can.

He began to be flesh from the flesh of the Virgin Mary. Yet this wasn't the beginning of the Word. The Word had existed from the beginning. What we hear in this Letter of John we also heard in John's Gospel. *"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God"*.

We can all gain a kind of knowledge of the Word by hearing about him, as we just have. But receiving human words, like the phrase "the Word of Life", is not the same as touching the body of Jesus Christ. Yet we are also told that *"this life was made visible"*; that is, Christ, who is the Word of Life has been made visible to us; isn't the visible touchable?

We know now that the Life which is in Christ, and which has been given to us, can actually be perceived only by the heart. Thus, for the healing of hearts, and so they may be able to perceive this life, it is made visible in various ways to human eyes. The Word and Life are perceived, and received, only by and in the heart, and yet we are led to them through their presence in the flesh and that is perceived by bodily vision and received in sacrament.

All this is possible because the Word itself became flesh in a way visible to mortal eyes. This was done so that the heart might be healed by what was seen by our eyes and so become capable of receiving the Word in an even fuller way.

Listen to John again: *"We saw it and we are giving testimony, telling you of the eternal life which was with the Father and has been made manifest to us."* And then he says: *"What we have seen and heard we are telling you"*. Who is doing this? John is doing it and telling us about it.

Now let me repeat these words: What we have seen and heard we are telling you, my dear friends. John and the other disciples saw the Lord present in the flesh and they heard his words and then repeated them to us. We did not see the Lord and we didn't even see his disciples, but we have seen those whose hearts were healed by him and by his disciples, and then were able to receive in their hearts the Word. Do you think you are less favored than they were?

Why did they tell us what they did? They answer, *"that you too may be in union with us"*. That means union, not just with them but with the Word and with the Father who sent the Word. What was worked through Jesus, by God's grace, is worked through his disciples. We share the same faith and so are in union with them. We are all in fellowship with Jesus Christ, and so with the Heavenly Father.

John adds: *"We write this so that your joy may be complete"*. It is the same fullness of joy, the same fellowship, the same unity, the same love that was made flesh in Jesus Christ and in St. John. Now they are made flesh and are seen and touched in us.

Saturday

THE ALL-EMBRACING LOVE OF CHRIST

A Reflection from a Letter by St. Cyprian of Carthage

The martyrdom of children marked the very beginning of Christ's life. For his name's sake, all those of two years old and under were put to death. Too young to fight in the usual ways, they were still made able to win a martyr's crown. By their innocence, they were made able to bear witness to the innocence of all those who shed their blood for Christ. When even such as these are made martyrs, witnesses, clearly no one is immune from the peril of persecution and witnessing. Clearly, in the same way, no one is separated from the love and care of Christ that makes one a martyr. Martyrdom is not a work we do and not a glory we earn; these are gifts given us freely and unearned by God.

What a shameful thing it would be if Christ's servants—God's servants, were to recoil from suffering what their Master suffered. We are living in a world dominated by sin and must not be unwilling to suffer the consequences. It is a gift from God. We ought not to refuse the gift, even if we are able. The Son of God suffered in order to make us children of God. We must not refuse to persevere in that glorious status by suffering. We may have to put up with the world's hatred, but so did Christ and so did the holy children.

Listen to Christ: *"If the world hates you, remember that it hated me. If you belonged to the world, the world would love its own. But you are not of the world; I chose you out of it, and therefore it hates you. Remember the saying I gave you, "The servant is not greater than the Master". If they persecute me, they will persecute you also."*

Such suffering is not due to what we make ourselves to be, but what God has given us along with the gifts of life and birth. There is no excuse for a servant to avoid what the martyrs had to endure. Our Lord and God practiced all he taught. We can't listen to the teaching and not be willing to live by it, and die by it.

Let none of us be so intimidated by the prospect of future persecution, or even the coming of the Antichrist, as not to be armed by the example of Christ, and the rest of God's servants, against whatever may happen. What if the Antichrist comes? Won't Christ come also? The enemy may rage and inflict wounds, but Christ comes to heal.

There is no one who can take us from Christ's arms for he is our Good Shepherd. We know what to fear—that we should separate ourselves from God and God's Christ. There is nothing else to fear. The love and care we receive is a free gift and no persecution comes without that gift coming too.