

SUNDAYS OF ADVENT 2023



INTRODUCTION

We hope you enjoy this aid to your scripture reflection, alone or with others, this Advent.

Lectio Divina is a practical approach to praying the scriptures. According to the Catechism of the Catholic Church, *Lectio Divina* occurs “where the Word of God is so read and meditated that it becomes prayer.” The three key moments of this approach to the scriptures are reading, reflection and prayer. We read the Word of God to understand it; we reflect on the Word to see how it can apply to our lives; we pray in order to be transformed by the Word.

These three “moments” of *Lectio Divina* can be summed up by three questions:

- i. When we read, we ask: “What does the text say in itself?”*
- ii. When we reflect, we ask: “What does the text say to me/us?”*
- iii. When we pray, we ask: “What does the text lead me/us to say?”*

*Thanks to Fr Sean Maher, Kildare & Leighlin,
who wrote these reflections and prayers.*



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GOSPEL
READING
MEDITATION
PRAYER

FIRST SUNDAY
MK 13:33-37

GOSPEL

Jesus said to his disciples: 'Be on your guard, stay awake, because you never know when the time will come. It is like a man travelling abroad: he has gone from home, and left his servants in charge, each with his own task; and he has told the doorkeeper to stay awake. So stay awake, because you do not know when the master of the house is coming, evening, midnight, cockcrow, dawn; if he comes unexpectedly, he must not find you asleep. And what I say to you I say to all: Stay awake!'

READING

What does the text say in itself?

As Advent begins we are given a strong and repeated emphasis on the need to avoid falling asleep! Not bad advice for Advent. Not once, but three times in this short Gospel passage, the Lord tells us to stay awake. Jesus knows that sustained focus on discipleship is difficult for us. We tend to wander; our attention and our energies tend to dissipate; we fatigue easily; we take our eye off the ball. In the very next chapter of Mark's Gospel, having cautioned his disciples three times to stay awake, Jesus finds them sleeping – three times! This is the hour of the Lord's passion, the time of his betrayal. He needs the support of his closest friends, yet they sleep their way through his ordeal. In that episode, we see that the Lord's closest allies are heedless not only of his suffering, but of his repeated teaching.

Jesus knows that discipleship entails an ongoing battle with the tendency to be distracted. But the stakes are higher than some moments of inattention: life is a single, unrepeatable journey towards a moment of judgment; the "master of the house" will return. Discipleship is about living in such a way that the master's return will be a cause of joy rather than sorrow, of confidence rather than fear. Wakefulness becomes a symbol of the life that is alert to the demands of discipleship.

MEDITATION

What does the text say to me/us?

"Stay awake, stand firm in your faith, be courageous, be strong." So writes St Paul near the end of his second letter to the Corinthians (16:13). It is

no coincidence that Paul urges his readers to wakefulness near the end of another of his letters (1Thessalonians 5:6). In both of those letters, Paul's parting note is a note of caution, a sobering note. Christian discipleship is wonderfully affirming, yet it is not wall-to-wall affirmation. It also offers us stern instruction; it unmask our weakness and bids us to be strong

The Lord does not commend wakefulness: he goes further than that - he commands it! We cannot be faithful disciples if we are permanently dissipated. On the other hand, however, our distractions and anxieties do not have the last word. The Lord who repeatedly urged his disciples to wakefulness did not lose patience with them when he repeatedly found them sleeping.

Advent is a season of waiting, and waiting calls for vigilance, watchfulness, wakefulness. The first Sunday Gospel for this Advent is insistent, and its very repetitiveness points to both the importance of vigilance and the risk of falling asleep.

PRAYER

What does the text lead me/us to say?

We repent. Lord, we acknowledge our weakness, our distractedness, our poor sense of priorities. We find it difficult to live a life that says "Thy kingdom come." The seed of your word is sown in us, yet we can be rocky soil, or shallow, or lured away by other concerns. Help us to bring all of our concerns to you, in a spirit of trust and watchfulness.

We rejoice. We thank and praise you Lord, for your gentle and compassionate insight into our frail human nature. You know our weakness and you address

it repeatedly. We rejoice in the conviction that the master will return, and that our life has a direction and a purpose.

We resolve. Our tendency to fall asleep is a deeper and wider issue than merely “being distracted at our prayers.” What is at issue is a failure to remain alert to the magnificence of what you, Lord, are doing. We resolve, especially during this season of Advent, to be more alert to your presence in our lives and in the world.

We pray for Peace: (Words of Pope Francis Saint Peter’s Basilica Friday, 27 October 2023)

Mother of mercy, we appeal for mercy! Queen of Peace, we appeal for peace! Touch the hearts of those imprisoned by hatred; convert those who fuel and foment conflict. Dry the tears of children – at this hour, so many are weeping! – be present to those who are elderly and alone; strengthen the wounded and the sick; protect those forced to leave their lands and their loved ones; console the crestfallen; awaken new hope. we make this prayer through Christ our Lord. Amen

GOSPEL
READING
MEDITATION
PRAYER

SECOND SUNDAY
MK 1:1-8

GOSPEL

The beginning of the Good News about Jesus Christ, the Son of God. It is written in the book of the prophet Isaiah:

Look, I am going to send my messenger before you; he will prepare your way. A voice cries in the wilderness:

Prepare a way for the Lord,
make his paths straight.

and so it was that John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. All Judaea and all the people of Jerusalem made their way to him, and as they were baptised by him in the river Jordan they confessed their sins. John wore a garment of camel-

skin, and he lived on locusts and wild honey. In the course of his preaching he said, 'Someone is following me, someone who is more powerful than I am, and I am not fit to kneel down and undo the strap of his sandals. I have baptised you with water, but he will baptise you with the Holy Spirit.'

READING

What does the text say in itself?

The season of Advent is a time of looking forwards, but Mark begins his Gospel by looking backwards. This Sunday, we read the opening verses of the Gospel, where Mark looks back to what was written in the prophet Isaiah. Mark does this so that he can locate Jesus in the plan of God which has been unfolding for centuries. Yes, God is doing something new, but it is a new chapter in an ancient and eternal plan of salvation.

The quotation from Isaiah comes from a section of that book known as the Book of Consolation. God's people had suffered greatly on account of their sins, but now the prophet is bringing them a consoling message of liberation. We are to understand Jesus in the same light: he is the one who consoles, the one who liberates.

Jesus, the Consolation of God, is preceded by one who prepares his way: John the Baptist. John's twin task is to help people become aware of their sinfulness, and to point them toward the only person who can deal with sin: Jesus. This is also a rich programme for Advent: being aware of our need, and looking confidently to Jesus.

MEDITATION

What does the text say to me/us?

If Advent is a time of anticipation, it is also a time to realize that we are already caught up in God's unfolding plan. At the first Easter, when Jesus met two disheartened disciples on the road to Emmaus, he explained to them how all that had happened had been anticipated in the Scriptures. We cannot open our Bible and find a simple interpretation of life's mysteries, yet our faith assures us that all of life – the past included – is caught up in God's providence. While it can be unhealthy to be heedless of the past, it is nevertheless true that the best way to heal the past is to have a lively sense of the future: a future full of hope (cf. Jeremiah 29:11).

There is a strong emphasis in this Gospel on sin, repentance, forgiveness, confession; and John the Baptist is portrayed as an austere figure. We may be conditioned to hear this kind of language as oppressive or heavy, but let us remember that the demands our faith makes are in the service of the "Good News of Jesus Christ." The discipline that faith imposes on us is only ever a preparation to receive greater blessings.

PRAYER

What does the text lead me/us to say?

We repent. We join with the people of Judaea and Jerusalem, as we confess our sins. This is a liberating confession, a happy acknowledgement that the Lord has greater things in store for us. Lord, we are sinners, in need of your mercy... and we trust that your mercy is abundant.

We rejoice. We thank and praise you Lord, for your plan that reaches into our past even as it promises us future blessings. There is no aspect of our lives that is beyond the reach of your healing and your mercy. Even during those times when we are in the wilderness, we rejoice in anticipation of the future you hold out to us.

We resolve. “Prepare a way for the Lord, make his paths straight.” This is our programme for Advent. It is our programme for discipleship. Lord, you do not force yourself upon us, but invite us to invite you. Help us to be honest about anything that might block, rather than prepare, your way into our lives.

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GOSPEL
READING
MEDITATION
PRAYER

THIRD SUNDAY
JN 1:6-8,19-28

GOSPEL

A man came, sent by God.

His name was John.

He came as a witness,
as a witness to speak for the light,
so that everyone might believe through him.

He was not the light,
only a witness to speak for the light.

This is how John appeared as a witness. When the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, 'Who are you?' he not only declared, but

he declared quite openly, 'I am not the Christ.' 'Well then,' they asked 'are you Elijah?' 'I am not' he said. 'Are you the Prophet?' He answered, 'No.' So they said to him, 'Who are you? We must take back an answer to those who sent us. What have you to say about yourself?' So John said, 'I am, as Isaiah prophesied:

a voice that cries in the wilderness:

Make a straight way for the Lord.'

Now these men had been sent by the Pharisees, and they put this further question to him, 'Why are you baptising if you are not the Christ, and not Elijah, and not the prophet?' John replied, 'I baptise with water; but there stands among you – unknown to you – the one who is coming after me; and I am not fit to undo his sandal-strap.' This happened at Bethany, on the far side of the Jordan, where John was baptising.

READING

What does the text say in itself?

The season of Advent is meant to function like a signpost pointing towards Christ. Likewise, John the Baptist, who figures strongly in the Advent Gospels, points towards Christ. There was a risk that people might think that a faithful and holy man like John was the Christ, and this is why the Gospel is careful to stress that John is a witness: "He was not the light, only a witness to speak for the light."

To mistake John for Christ would be to mistake the signpost for the destination. John himself was having none of this, and his wonderfully blunt statement, "I am not the Christ," is a tribute to his realism and humility. John will not even accept the tribute due to a prophet; he is simply a voice crying out, appealing

to people to get ready for the Lord. John's ministry is effective precisely because he is self-effacing: he openly declares that he is not worthy even to untie the Lord's sandal. There is no "tripping the light fantastic" here: John's ministry is not about John; it is all about Jesus.

The Gospel takes pains to qualify the role of John, and by doing so it reminds us of the human tendency to be diverted and misled by appearances. The world in which Jesus ministered was full of diversions – but in John the Baptist, people encountered a reliable signpost.

MEDITATION

What does the text say to me/us?

If Advent is a time for looking towards the light of Christ, then it is also, by definition, a time for looking away from lesser lights. In this sense, the season of Advent – not unlike the season of Lent – had an element of purification, of self-emptying. We can all make our own the confession of John: "I am not the Christ; I am not the Messiah." While no sane person would imagine that they were literally the Messiah, there can be subtle (and perhaps not so subtle) elements of messianic thinking in the most sane of us.

To have "notions" about oneself is a common human failing. John the Baptist has no notions about himself, and he teaches us that the best way to be open to Christ and his coming is to let go of any exaggerated notions about ourselves. It's not a matter of putting ourselves down, or adopting a false humility that we wear on our sleeve. The antidote to our "notions" is Christ: we look to him, and it is in him that we get the measure of ourselves.

PRAYER

What does the text lead me/us to say?

We repent. Lord, we are poor signposts. We repent of our “notions”! Help us to be realistic about ourselves, to take ourselves more lightly, to look to you for wisdom and to point others to your light.

We rejoice. It is you, O Lord, who are our light. You are the light whose coming we are preparing to celebrate. It is by your light that we walk. It is in you that God has “called us out of darkness into his own wonderful light” (cf. 1Pet 2:9). We thank and praise you as we say: “The Lord is my light and my salvation” (Ps 27:1).

We resolve. We will not be diverted by lesser lights. We will look to the one who says: “I am the light of the world; the one who follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life” (Jn 8:12). This Advent, we look towards the light and we redouble our efforts to walk by the light!

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GOSPEL
READING
MEDITATION
PRAYER

FOURTH SUNDAY
LK 1:26-38

GOSPEL

The angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man named Joseph, of the House of David; and the virgin's name was Mary. He went in and said to her, 'Rejoice, so highly favoured! The Lord is with you.' She was deeply disturbed by these words and asked herself what this greeting could mean, but the angel said to her, 'Mary, do not be afraid; you have won God's favour. Listen! You are to conceive and bear a son, and you must name him Jesus. He will be great and will be called Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his ancestor David; he will rule over the House of Jacob for ever and his reign will have no end.' Mary said to the angel, 'But how can this come about, since I am

a virgin?’ ‘The Holy Spirit will come upon you’ the angel answered ‘and the power of the Most High will cover you with its shadow. And so the child will be holy and will be called Son of God. Know this too: your kinswoman Elizabeth has, in her old age, herself conceived a son, and she whom people called barren is now in her sixth month, for nothing is impossible to God.’ ‘I am the handmaid of the Lord,’ said Mary ‘let what you have said be done to me.’ And the angel left her.

READING

What does the text say in itself?

In approaching this most familiar Gospel passage, we need to be wary of the trap of excessive familiarity. God’s word does not wear thin: it is we who do! Let us attend carefully to this reading, so that it may speak to us afresh.

What are the “ingredients” of this episode? First of all, we see that God’s plan is unfolding not in the abstract, but in a very concrete set of circumstances. The angel is sent to a particular girl, Mary, in a particular town, Nazareth.

The angel’s announcement of God’s plan meets with natural human uncertainty, which is answered not by demonstration, but by reassurance. Mary assents to what she has heard, she offers her “yes” to God. This is followed by another moment of reassurance, when the angel encourages Mary with the news that her cousin is also expecting a child.

Mary is not forced or cajoled: the angel appeals to her freedom. She does not receive proof, but just enough reassurance to sustain her in her commitment. Like us, she must walk by faith rather than by sight; it is not by accident that the Gospel tells us that the angel left her.

MEDITATION

What does the text say to me/us?

One prominent theologian of the ancient Church observed that Mary conceived in her heart before she conceived in her womb. It was her openness to God's word, communicated through the angel Gabriel, that made her able to give birth to Jesus, the Word made flesh.

Christian discipleship is all about receptiveness to God. When we seek to be receptive to God's word, we "give birth" to Christ in all kinds of ways. It is our openness to God's plans for ourselves and our world that gives life to the words we pray so often: "Thy will be done on earth." Without real openness to God, without a real desire to engage with him and to be led by his Spirit, our discipleship is unproductive, infertile, sterile.

When, in contrast, we are receptive to God's word, we give life. Mary literally gave flesh to Jesus. We, too, can give life: we can bear a rich harvest. We can have a share in the role of Mary. We can experience the truth of Jesus' words: "Whoever does the will of God is my brother, and sister, and mother" (Mark 3:35).

PRAYER

What does the text lead me/us to say?

We repent. Mary's question, "How can this come about?" arose from a desire to be fully engaged in God's plan. Sometimes our questioning can arise from a reluctance to be engaged. We repent, Lord, of our holding back,

of our lack of generosity and trust. May this Advent be for us a time of growth in trust.

We rejoice. We rejoice in the Lord's invitation to us to be players in his plan. It is not in the visit of an angel, but in the call or our baptism, that we are enlisted into God's project for the world. The details may not always be plain to us, yet we can rejoice that the details of our lives – even those that are obscure or painful – are embraced by God's plan.

We resolve. Mary was receptive, but she was not passive. She was an active participant in God's plan. We resolve to be active in our discipleship, not as a vague intention to be "better Christians," but as a deliberate seeking out of concrete ways to serve Christ in our brothers and sisters, and to make him known to all.

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