



FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT 2024

INTRODUCTION

We hope you enjoy this aid to your scripture reflection, alone or with others, during this Advent. Prayer is an integral part of our Synodal journey. This Advent why not take time to reflect on our Sunday Gospels. Take a moment to slow down in our busy world.

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?”*



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READ
REFLECT
PRAY

FIRST SUNDAY

LUKE 21:25-28. 34-36

READ

Your liberation is near at hand.

Jesus said to his disciples: 'There will be signs in the sun and moon and stars; on earth nations in agony, bewildered by the clamour of the ocean and its waves; men dying of fear as they await what menaces the world, for the powers of heaven will be shaken. And then they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory. When these things begin to take place, stand erect, hold your heads high, because your liberation is near at hand.'

'Watch yourselves, or your hearts will be coarsened with debauchery and drunkenness and the cares of life, and that day will be sprung on you

suddenly, like a trap. For it will come down on every living man on the face of the earth. Stay awake, praying at all times for the strength to survive all that is going to happen, and to stand with confidence before the Son of Man.’
The Gospel of the Lord.

REFLECT

In the Gospel of John (16:20), Jesus tells his disciples that they will weep while the world rejoices. The Lord anticipated that the demands of discipleship, coupled with the opposition of the world, would cause his followers much distress. Meanwhile, the world would rejoice in its own ways, esteem those who agreed with its philosophies and attitudes, turn false prophets into heroes, call good evil and evil good.

Discipleship is the source of the deepest possible joy, yet Jesus knows that as long as we are in the world, our discipleship must also be a series of crises. The world, however, does not know the goodness of God, the wisdom of his righteous demands, the nature of true freedom, the beauty of sacrifice. The world is ‘free’ of the burden of righteousness and, to that extent, it enjoys a kind of happiness that is not given to disciples.

The picture in today’s Gospel is almost exactly the opposite. Now, while the world is being brought to its knees, it is time for disciples to stand erect. While the world is convulsed with dread and the fear of what is to come, disciples are to walk with confidence and to look forward to what God is bringing to pass. While the world’s pleasures are a memory that brings only remorse, disciples can experience unbridled delight in the Lord. How these words resonate today. In our world shaken by this ongoing pandemic we, a

people of faith, the disciples of today are called to stand tall trusting in the Lord.

In the Gospel the Lord goes on to paint the situation of his disciples in even more vivid colours. It is precisely at the time when the joys and securities and hopes of the world collapse, that the disciple is invited to stand strong and with boundless confidence.

But even faithful disciples are flesh and blood; they too can be overcome by life's pleasures and anxieties. And so the Lord cautions them: 'Watch yourselves... Stay awake, praying at all times...' Here we touch on a central paradox of discipleship: the necessary co-existence of trust and mistrust, trust in the Lord and mistrust of ourselves. To be a follower of Jesus is to be stretched between these two poles, and to realize that mistrust of ourselves need never lead to despair when it is coupled with trust in the Lord, and trust in the Lord need never lead to presumption when it is accompanied by a healthy mistrust in ourselves.

PRAY

We thank you, Lord, for your promises and your wisdom. Help us to bear the burden of discipleship with generosity and love, and to stand with confidence in your presence. Our world and our culture constantly challenge our faith. With your help, we will not retreat into bitterness or fear, but continue to show the witness of a life that has been blessed by the Gospel. May this holy, joyful season of Advent be a time for praying with humility, and for confident anticipation of your victory. Amen.

Our Jubilee Prayer: Father in heaven, may the faith you have given us...

READ
REFLECT
PRAY
SECOND SUNDAY
LUKE 3:1-6

READ

All mankind shall see the salvation of God

In the fifteenth year of Tiberius Caesar's reign, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judaea, Herod tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of the lands of Ituraea and Trachonitis, Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene, during the pontificate of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah, in the wilderness. He went through the whole Jordan district proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, as it is written in the book of the sayings of the prophet Isaiah:

A voice cries in the wilderness;

Prepare a way for the Lord,
make his paths straight.
Every valley will be filled in,
every mountain and hill be laid low,
winding ways will be straightened
and rough roads made smooth.
And all mankind shall see the salvation of God.

This is the Gospel of the Lord.

REFLECT

Have you ever read a book with lots of footnotes? Usually, that kind of book is the preserve of scholars. You won't find footnotes in a novel or a short story. They'd be a distraction from the main events. In fact, that's why even scholarly books have footnotes: so that the readers don't get too distracted from the main train of thought. They might glance down to see what's in a footnote – or then again, they might not. In any case, when material is put in a footnote, that's to make the point that while it might be of some interest, it might also be a distraction.

When the evangelists were writing their Gospels, they did not use footnotes. But in a certain sense, they did. We have a lovely example of 'footnotes that aren't quite footnotes' in today's Gospel reading from Luke. The evangelist wants to set the stage for the preaching of John the Baptist. He begins by telling us who the Roman emperor was at that time. He then tells us who was in charge of the Roman province in which John – and Jesus – lived. Then Luke goes on to tell us who the local leaders were, and who was in charge in Jerusalem.

But the most important thing Luke has to tell us is that the Word of God came to a certain person, John the Baptist, while all these other people were – apparently! – in charge. That’s the heart of the matter, as far as Luke the evangelist is concerned: the most important and influential people are those who are receiving the Word of God, just as Mary received the word of God at Nazareth, and went on to become the Mother of Jesus, the Word incarnate. The emperor Tiberius and his agents, Pontius Pilate, Philip and Lysanias, are the background to what God is doing. They are, to use an image from the computer desktop environment, ‘wallpaper.’ They are footnotes! We are invited to take a glance at them, but only so that we might locate the real action, and the real action in the Gospel happens whenever people are open to the word of God. This is true for disciples today: there is so much going on in the world, so much chatter and debate and controversy. But where is the real action happening? The real action today is located in the very same place as the real action in the time of John the Baptist, Mary – and Jesus. It is where God’s word is heard and heeded by his faithful people, irrespective of who is in charge, or what is going on in the world.

PRAY

Lord, in this season of Advent, as in every time, there is so much happening, there is so much turmoil in the world. This pandemic has us in fear and turmoil. We can receive into our hearts a large and depressing dose of speculation and anxiety, or we can open our hearts to your word, just like John the Baptist, and Mary, indeed like Jesus himself. Help us to choose well, to have the wisdom to receive your word into our hearts and to bear a rich harvest in our lives. Amen.

Our Jubilee Prayer: Father in heaven, may the faith you have given us...

READ
REFLECT
PRAY

THIRD SUNDAY

LUKE 3:10-18

READ

What must we do?

When all the people asked John, 'What must we do?' he answered, 'If anyone has two tunics he must share with the man who has none, and the one with something to eat must do the same.' There were tax collectors too who came for baptism, and these said to him, 'Master what must we do?' He said to them, 'Exact no more than your rate.' Some soldiers asked him in their turn, 'What about us? What must we do?' He said to them, 'No intimidation! No extortion! Be content with your pay!'

A feeling of expectancy had grown among the people, who were beginning to think that John might be the Christ, so John declared before them all,

'I baptise you with water, but someone is coming, Someone who is more powerful than I am, and I am not fit to undo the strap of his sandals; he will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing-fan is in his hand to clear his threshing-floor and to gather the wheat into his barn; but the chaff he will burn in a fire that will never go out.' As well as this, there were many other things he said to exhort the people and to announce the Good News to them.

This is the Gospel of the Lord.

REFLECT

What is the essence of Christian faith, the cornerstone, the foundation? What, for the followers of Jesus, is the heart of the matter? Many sincere believers imagine that to be a disciple is to do certain things, and to avoid certain other things. In this, they are not entirely wrong, but nor are they entirely right. Indeed, they are more wrong than right! The very heart of the Gospel is not what we are supposed to do for God, but what God has already done for us. The foundation of our faith is not what we do, but what God has done in Jesus.

Our faith is all about God's gift to us. God has sent us his Son as our Redeemer, our Saviour. Does this mean that what we do is irrelevant? Far from it! What it means is that anything we do as disciples is a response to what God has done for us. The first letter of Saint John captures this in a few short words: 'God loved us first' (1Jn 4:19). Any good we do, any evil we patiently endure, the worthy and noble hopes and aspirations we nurture in

our hearts... all of these are a response to the prior goodness of God, who has loved us in Jesus.

We should bear this in mind when we listen to today's Gospel. Notice that three times in this short reading we hear the words, 'What must we do?' Why did people even ask that question? They asked it because they had encountered the proclamation of Jesus, made by his servant, John the Baptist. They asked that question because they had seen, they had sensed, something of the goodness of God that was being proclaimed by John. This goodness stirred in them the desire to do what was good and right. Their very question was a response to goodness. They were not initiating a project or a plan; rather, they were responding – responding, to goodness. They were, we might say, being honest to goodness!

The meaning of this season of Advent can be summed up as an invitation to be honest to goodness, honest to the goodness of God, shown to us in Jesus his Son. Truth to tell, we're not very good at sustaining that response. We flounder, we fail, we fall. If the whole business were a matter of our goodness, our nobility and integrity, we'd have to acknowledge that it's all rather unsatisfactory, to say the least. But it's precisely at those times when we are aware of our failures that we need to return to the foundation, the heart of the matter, which is the goodness of God, rather than our own goodness or our own strength or our own consistency. Advent is a time to put down roots, once again, in Jesus, who is the Goodness of God. It is He who draws us out of ourselves and our failures, to a fresh start, to a new beginning of goodness.

PRAY

Lord our God, we thank you for this season of renewal, for your invitation to begin again, to renew our response. Help us to see everything we do, every effort we make, as a response to your goodness, shown to us in Jesus your Son, who is Goodness itself. Amen.

Our Jubilee Prayer: Father in heaven, may the faith you have given us....

READ
REFLECT
PRAY

FOURTH SUNDAY

LUKE 1:39-45

READ

Why should I be honoured with a visit from the mother of my Lord?

Mary set out and went as quickly as she could to a town in the hill country of Judah. She went into Zechariah's house and greeted Elizabeth. Now as soon as Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leapt in her womb and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. She gave a loud cry and said, 'Of all women you are the most blessed, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. Why should I be honoured with a visit from the mother of my Lord? For the moment your greeting reached my ears, the child in my womb leapt for joy.

Yes, blessed is she who believed that the promise made her by the Lord would be fulfilled.'

This is the Gospel of the Lord.

REFLECT

When we meet her in this Gospel reading, Mary has just said her 'yes' to God's plan, communicated by the Angel Gabriel. That episode ends on a sobering note: we're told that once Mary said, 'let your word be done to me,' the angel left her. Mary was not going to experience constant light and peace; she would have to walk in faith – and often in darkness.

Did the departure of the angel plunge Mary into confusion? Far from it. Her very first action after giving her consent to God's plan is to visit someone else who is caught up in that plan. The Gospel tells us that Mary went hastily, 'as quickly as she could,' to visit her cousin Elizabeth. This is not an incidental or by-the-way observation. Mary is filled with good news; the Good News Himself is growing within her. And good news demands to be shared! The urgently felt need to share what God is doing, and to enter into in communion with others, is a sign of authentic faith.

It's striking that the unfolding of Luke's Gospel allows no time for Mary to enter into contemplation once the angel has left her; she does not take time to 'process' what she has experienced. The only process that interests Mary is sharing the Good News with her cousin. It's not mistaken to see Mary's arduous journey to the hill country of Judah as an act of kindness towards her older cousin, who is six months pregnant, but it is far more than that. Mary will certainly be of help to her older cousin, but any practical help she will offer in the remaining three months of Elizabeth's pregnancy springs

from her sense of being blessed, her sense of carrying a message of joy which she cannot but communicate.

There is a tremendous lesson in all of this, one that can put our ‘good deeds’ in a proper – and lovely – perspective. For Christians, the good we seek to do for others flows, or should flow, from the conviction of having been blessed. To come to the assistance of our sisters and brothers is not so much a moral burden, as the necessary, natural consequence of having goodness to share. Goodness does not want to be alone! Mary hastened to visit Elizabeth not because she was lonely but because she was overflowing with goodness.

What happens when the two cousins are united? There is deep joy, with greeting and leaping! Notice that Mary’s greeting is mentioned three times, and twice we hear that the unborn John leaps in his mother’s womb. The joy being shared is not some cerebral abstraction, but a felt delight that leads to a cry of ecstasy.

PRAY

Lord, we thank you for the Good News received and carried by Mary. Help us, like Mary, to experience the sharing of the Gospel as a joyful imperative, rather than as a challenge, a burden, or a crisis. May we come to understand – and to experience – that the most authentic response to what you are doing is joy, delight. When we feel that the angel has left us, may we not fall into sadness or worry, but hasten, in a spirit of faith, to share your blessings with others. Amen.

Our Jubilee Prayer: Father in heaven, may the faith you have given us...



THE JUBILEE PRAYER

Father in heaven,
may the faith you have given us
in your son, Jesus Christ, our brother,
and the flame of charity enkindled
in our hearts by the Holy Spirit,
reawaken in us the blessed hope
for the coming of your Kingdom.

May your grace transform us
into tireless cultivators of the seeds of the Gospel.
May those seeds transform from within both humanity and the whole cosmos
in the sure expectation
of a new heaven and a new earth,
when, with the powers of Evil vanquished,
your glory will shine eternally.

May the grace of the Jubilee
reawaken in us, Pilgrims of Hope,
a yearning for the treasures of heaven.
May that same grace spread
the joy and peace of our Redeemer
throughout the earth.
To you our God, eternally blessed,
be glory and praise for ever.

Amen

