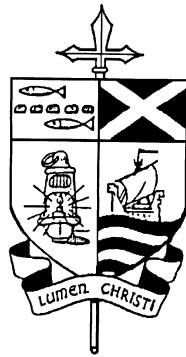


Reflections

for

Advent & Christmas 2010

The Year of Matthew



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INTRODUCTION

“When the Church celebrates the liturgy of Advent each year she makes present this ancient expectancy of the Messiah for, by sharing in the long preparation for the Saviour’s First Coming, the faithful renew their ardent desire for his Second Coming.

“By celebrating the precursor’s¹ birth and martyrdom, the Church unites herself to his desire: ‘He must increase, but I must decrease’². ”

(Catechism of the Catholic Church No. 524)

In this spirit (recording the First Coming in order to repossess the desire for the Second Coming) we start our Advent journey.



¹ John the Baptist’s

² John 3, 30

FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT

BEING AWAKE OR WAKE UP

Isaiah 2: 1-5; Romans 13: 11-14; Matthew 24: 37-44

If we think in terms of Christian virtue, this Sunday encourages the virtue of being attentive. The Christian life is about being ready to welcome the Lord when he comes. We cannot afford to be caught napping. It is so easy to be seduced by the lovely things that surround us or happen around us, and miss the point of their loveliness. Were they understood deeply they would direct our minds and hearts.

A number of short images in Matthew's Gospel all have the same message:

- Many were caught out by the flood. Noah did not miss out, because he was tuned into what the Lord was doing.
- The story of one person taken, another left, gives the message that what will happen, will happen quickly.
- The householder being ready to defend his property against the burglar tells us to be as vigilant as he is.

Underpinning this vigilance is the hope that God will deliver on His promises, in His time and in His way. On our side, there is a deep yearning in us for the coming of the Lord, and His bringing to completion what was achieved in His death and resurrection.

Is this desire for the Lord to come again strong in our hearts? Or are we quite happy to settle for the ‘same again, please’ of a more this-worldly celebration of Christmas, focussing on the elements that we enjoy but which are quite empty if they are taken away from their Christian origins and hope for the future?

Pray for the virtue to be attentive
while waiting for what God is doing
in our world and in our lives

SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT

AWAITING THE BAPTISM OF THE HOLY SPIRIT & FIRE

Isaiah 11: 1-10; Romans 15: 4-9; Matthew 3: 1-12

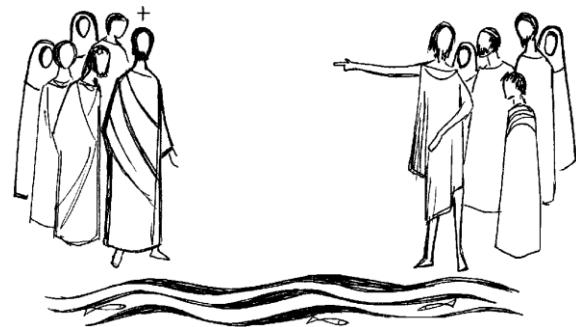
The liturgy of the Church very deliberately brings us each year into the presence of John the Baptist. Why?

First, he prepares the way of the Lord. His is not a task done once-and-for-all. This preparation is ongoing. John is not just a figure for his own time. He certainly had an historical task to fulfil, but he enters into the flow of life that is the Church, the Body of Christ. Each year John is asked to preach to us once again, announcing the coming of the Lord in the present, as we celebrate another memorial of the Coming of the Lord (our Feast of Christmas).

At some future date the Second and definitive Coming of the Lord will bring judgement and the completion of the history of grace to its fullness. Advent invites us to rekindle that desire for the Lord's Second Coming.

Secondly, he must continue to deliver the Gospel of repentance because the Lord is coming. Whether we think we should identify with the crowd, or we think we are different from them, we need to change the way we think, behave and live our lives if we are to be a people ready for the Lord's Coming.

Advent is not cast as a period of severe penance, but it is intended to put us in touch with our sinfulness (our wayward heart) and to do something about it. It enables us to become disciples awaiting the return of our Lord and master.



Pray for the spirit of penance

THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT

IS IT THE LORD?

Isaiah 35: 1-6 & 10; James 5: 7-10; Matthew 11: 2 -11

Imprisoned by Herod, John wonders in his captivity whether the one he now hears about is the one he had attempted to prepare the way for. Imaginatively we can see John having a moment or two of self-doubt, especially about the effectiveness of his own work. We can identify with him.

The work that John had undertaken was work on behalf of God's kingdom. He was well aware that he was an instrument of something greater. Rather like his comment about Jesus who followed him, "He is greater than I am", John, imprisoned as he is, knows in his bones that the overriding important issue is God's kingdom, coming in Jesus.

The question that he sends to Jesus is a check that Jesus is the One. Jesus' answer is twofold:

- He uses Isaiah to reassure John that He is indeed the One who is to come: "The blind see again and the lame walk, lepers are

cleansed, and the deaf hear and the dead are raised to life, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor; and happy is the man who does not lose faith in me.” This answer is very much an Advent answer and tells us all we need to know about the One whose birth we mark and celebrate shortly.

- Jesus also takes the opportunity of John’s question to pay tribute to John’s greatness. In effect Jesus says that John is the most outstanding person to be formed by the original covenant between God and His people. Jesus highlights the overwhelming priority of the kingdom that He is and that He inaugurates in history. Great and outstanding as John is, the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he is. That is a staggering remark. The kingdom of heaven and the coming of the One who is that kingdom in His own person is the cause of our joy. Hence today is known as Rejoice or Gaudete Sunday.

Pray for the ability to be able to discern
the priorities of the kingdom of heaven

FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT

THE SIGN OF THE MAIDEN

Isaiah 7: 10-14; Romans 1: 1-7; Matthew 1: 18-25

The last Sunday of Advent always belongs to Our Lady. This must be the case as she is the person through whom Jesus, the One we await, came into our race and into our history.

So Mary is the gate and will always lead us to her Son. She remains a permanent sign of cooperation with the ways of God, as powerfully expressed in Matthew's account of Jesus' birth.

We can notice in this account that all the action takes place around Mary. She is a silent person. The only thing happening to her is that she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit.

Joseph is the active one. He is troubled by the news of Mary's pregnancy but complies with the dream that puts him 'in the know' about the child. Above all, he embodies everything that being the just man of the older covenant involves: totally open to the ways of God, not deciding for himself how it should be done.

The Church rightly puts Mary and Joseph together. They both exemplify human beings at their best at the service of the Lord. The response of the psalm says it all: "*Let the Lord enter*". In accepting her child Mary has let the Lord enter her womb, her life, our history in order to carry out the design of His Father and our Father.

The name the prophet gives to the child (Emmanuel – God is with us) is a lovely Advent name for Jesus. God is with us in a way that totally goes beyond our wildest expectations. He is the Lord, and Mary is the mother of the Lord.

As we move towards Christmas 2010, we can take the opening of St Paul's Letter to the Romans as a focus for our prayers:

"This news is about the Son of God who, according to the humble nature he took, was a descendant of David; it is about Jesus Christ, our Lord, who, in the order of the Spirit, the Spirit of Holiness that was in him, was proclaimed Son of God in all his power through his resurrection from the dead."

Pray the 1st Joyful Mystery of the Rosary
– The Annunciation

THE SEASON OF CHRISTMAS

Culturally and socially it is very easy to fall under the impression that all of Christmas is contained in the Feast of 25th December. This is not true.

For Christ's disciples the mystery of the Word made flesh is celebrated through the number of feasts between Christmas Day and the Baptism of the Lord. The mystery of the Word becoming one of us is so deep that it is inadequately expressed in the succession of feasts, each one of which is worth pondering prayerfully:

- The Nativity of the Lord
- The Holy Family of Jesus, Mary & Joseph
- The Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of God
- The Epiphany of the Lord
- The Baptism of the Lord



CHRISTMAS DAY

There are four sets of readings, all of which reward prayerful reading:

VIGIL: *Isaiah 62: 1-5; Acts 13: 16-17 & 22-25; Matthew 1: 1-25*

MIDNIGHT: *Isaiah 9: 2-7; Titus 2: 11-14; Luke 2: 1-14*

DAWN: *Isaiah 62: 11-12; Titus 3: 4-7; Luke 2: 15-20*

Day: *Isaiah 52: 7-10; Hebrews 1: 1-6; John 1: 1-18*

Such richness of texts is the making of many volumes of learned theology. For our prayer purposes I would like to highlight the following central points:-

- The liturgy of 25th December focuses primarily on the gift which is the child. It elicits from us a response of love and thanksgiving. The Gloria, which features in our festivals around the year, is particularly at home on this day. Apart from its opening words being in the Gospel at midnight Mass, it says in prayer everything we need to say about praise and thanksgiving for the gift of the Lord.
- At the Vigil Mass we have the Gospel of the genealogy. The details of this genealogy need and reward careful unpacking, but the message is clear: we have a debt of gratitude to the Jewish

people for this son of David, son of Mary. If only this had been our perception of the Jewish people down the ages!

- We also have the strongest statements about Jesus' identity that the scriptures allow. To the Shepherds "A Saviour has been born to you; He is Christ the Lord". In John's prologue we have that central affirmation of our faith so well known to so many: "The Word was made flesh, He lived among us and we saw his glory, the glory that is his as the only Son of the Father, full of grace and truth"; and in the Letter to the Hebrews "He is the radiant light of God's glory and the perfect copy of his nature, sustaining the universe by his powerful command".
- The theological, doctrinal tradition of the Church summarises all this by the simple phrase: Jesus is truly God and truly man.

Jesus is the One who gives Christmas its status – no-one else can!

Pray by pondering the gift of Jesus Christ
to us and to our race

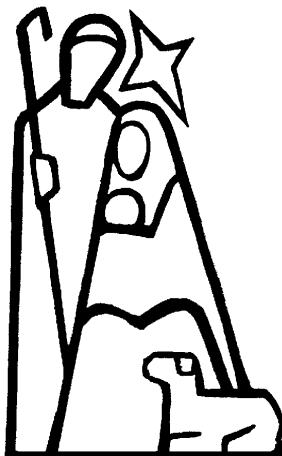
HOLY FAMILY

THE TRANSFORMATION AND THE ENLARGEMENT OF THE FAMILY

Ecclesiasticus 3: 2-6 & 12 -14; Colossians 3: 12 -21; Matthew 2: 13-15 & 19-23

One of the knock-on effects of Christmas - Jesus becoming one of us - is that it transforms and enlarges all our relationships. If the Lord of the Universe, of all Creation, chooses to change his relationship with us by becoming one of us, in principle all our relationships with each other are changed and deepened.

Understandably, the relationships which we call 'family' will always have a privileged place in our thinking about what it means to be human. Human beings are deeply affected, and hopefully enriched, by who their parents and siblings are.



As we know, much in family life can go wrong and be deeply damaging. The really positive change is about these relationships. They are not just life-bearing in this life, but life-bearing for eternal life. Despite what can go wrong, the Coming of Christ has expanded the basis on which our life bearing relationships are grounded. A new family comes into existence based on grace and faith, which transforms natural family ties and enlarges the range of all relationships. With the coming of grace the family of the Church becomes inevitable.

The primary focus today – The Holy Family of Nazareth – is the source and origin of all graceful favours flowing into every natural family. As Colossians puts it “*You are God's chosen race, his saints*”. This is so because the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us. Old families and new families can breathe the air of eternal life because of the Coming of Christ.

Pray for your family

MARY MOTHER OF GOD

Numbers 6: 22-27; Galatians 4: 4-7; Luke 2: 16-21

Spend time with Mary. There is a devotional movement called “A day with Mary”. From what I have seen of a typical programme, the hours are so packed that the participants seem to have little time to be quiet and to make time and space to be quiet with Mary. My invitation for this day is to be quiet and allow yourself prayerfully to appreciate the person of Mary, Mother of God and her role in the divine drama of redemption.

The first thing to strike us about Mary is that she is not very busy. Choices and actions for her are about living out the response she made to the angel: “*Behold the handmaid of the Lord, be it done to me according to your word*”.

What that response allowed was that Mary would become an instrument in the hands of God. Through her the divine plan of salvation was to become a reality in our history. She allowed herself to be the one whose whole life was tied up with God becoming man and bringing about our liberation from the slavery of sin. She embraced with single-mindedness God’s graceful initiative and saw it through to the end.

Being by the cross and with the other apostles on Pentecost are both instances of her total involvement with the Father's design for all of us.

Mary's typical attitude to her task is beautifully expressed in today's Gospel "As for Mary she treasured all these things and pondered them in her heart". Mary's greatness is contained in those two words "treasured" and "pondered". Her son is the centre of her life and her principal activity is allowing herself to treasure and ponder who He is and what He had come to achieve. In the "treasuring" and "pondering" Mary allowed herself to be formed, not by what she pondered but **whom** she pondered.

Mary challenges the hyper-activism of our own age. She is a living witness to the saying of Jesus about another Mary choosing the better part.

Perhaps the best way to honour and value Mary is to follow her lead about that pondering.

Pray a decade of the Joyful Mysteries
of the Rosary

THE EPIPHANY

THE GLORY OF THE LORD IS RISING IN YOU

Isaiah 60: 1-6; Ephesians 3: 2-3 & 5-6; Matthew 2: 1-12

On this festival the Church celebrates her Catholicity and her mission to the nations. The Church does not choose to be Catholic. She is so because God's love and concern for the whole of Creation requires her to be so.

Christmas is not a feast just for those who belong to this new family of Christ. It is not for the elite. It is for everyone; without exception all people are invited to the newborn child. The three mysterious figures from the East represent the whole of humanity's search for God and for what God is doing in our history. God is not so much doing things as being with us in our history so that our story can ultimately make sense by becoming His story.

Taking this Catholicity seriously, the Church must also undertake mission. The good news of Christmas is not for a select few; it is for everyone. This mission is not to be forced but it is to be lived, believed and shared. Quite often we are shy about this sharing or going public about this

good news and our acceptance of it. Pope Benedict encouraged us to go into the public domain – not to boast but to be witnesses.

It is not a simple process, as we need to feel confident about addressing issues of the day that need light and direction from Christ the light of the world. It can also be complicated by those who directly or indirectly wish to derail anything connected with faith in Christ. This disruptive influence can come from outside (we could call it the Herod factor), or from inside when those who claim to belong live in such a way or hold such destructive views that the light of the Gospel cannot shine clearly.

It is appropriate that on the Epiphany celebration of Christmas we realise that Christ comes into a very ambiguous world, not one that is ripe for acceptance of the good news.

There is a contrast between a certain homeliness of 25th December and the rugged reality of a world to which it is revealed. This latter aspect of Christmas is captured in the celebration of the Epiphany.

Pray for the mission of the Church

THE BAPTISM OF THE LORD

THE LORD LEADS THE MISSION

Isaiah 42: 1-4 & 6-7; Acts 10: 34-38; Matthew 3: 13-17

Christmas finishes not at a dead end or on a nostalgic note, but on the banks of the Jordan with John the Baptist and those who went to him for a fresh start. The Church's annual celebration of Christmas is not a self-contained unit but leads where it can only lead: into Christ's ministry and his proclamation of the kingdom. Once again the focus returns to the identity of the One who approaches John at the Jordan. Everything hinges on this identity, and the liturgy of the Church is very keen that we should get it right. If we get this wrong we have no chance of understanding the mission Jesus enters into as he goes public in taking on the powers of evil and Satan.

Who then is this on the banks of the Jordan with John the Baptist?

- Through the eyes of Isaiah he is “My chosen One in whom my soul delights. I have endowed him with my Spirit that he may bring true justice to the nations”, “I the

Lord have called you to serve the cause of right, I have taken you by the hand and formed you, I have appointed you Covenant of the People and Light of the Nations." Through the eyes of Isaiah we have the faithful servant of God, ready to do God's work.

- Through the eyes of the Acts of the Apostles, "*Jesus Christ is Lord of all men.*" "*God had anointed him with the Holy Spirit and with power and God was with him.*" It is very plain that we are not dealing with an ordinary prophet or rabbi. We are dealing with someone that has a totally unique relationship with God.
- John the Baptist in Matthew, echoing Advent, exclaims "*I need to be baptised by you.*" As Jesus comes from the water, "*The Spirit of God descended like a dove.....and a voice spoke from heaven, 'This is my Son the Beloved; my favour rests on him'.*" At Jordan, Jesus, the sinless one, identifies himself with sinful humanity in order to liberate humanity from the slavery of sin.

Pray for the mission of the Church

Rejoice!



Bishop's House
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