

Bishop Christopher's Reflections for Advent & Christmas 2011

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The Year of Mark Bishop Christopher's Reflections for Advent and Christmas span the period from the First Sunday of Advent (27 November 2011) to the Epiphany of the Lord (8 January 2012), with an end note on the Feast of the Baptism of the Lord (9 January 2012).

OPENING PRAYER

Grant your faithful, we pray, almighty God,
the resolve to run forth to meet your Christ
with righteous deeds at his coming, so that,
gathered at his right hand,
they may be worthy to possess the heavenly kingdom.
Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son,
who lives and reigns with you
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, for ever and ever.
Amen

(Collect from the 1st Sunday of Advent 2011)

FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT

BEING ALERT

Isaiah 63, 16-17; 64, 1.3-8; 1 Corinthians 1, 3-9; Mark 13, 33-37

In many places we still 'bump into' Pope Benedict's encouragement to our young people in September 2010, that they are called to be the "future saints of the 21st century". These are not just pious words that sound nice. They take us to the purpose of our existence - to be with God for ever and to achieve the end for which we were created.

The 1st Sunday of Advent directs our attention to some features of our lives in Christ that will show what this 'being a saint' is all about. The Gospel has one dominant word that echoes around: 'watch', or be alert. For what are we watching?

We are watching for the presence of God in the ordinary events of life. We are not looking for or yearning for the extraordinary, although that may happen from time to time. In the ordinary things that make up the daily round - the mundane things we do, the people we meet, the issues we have to deal with etc. - these are the places that we meet the Lord and see his ways.

This sort of alertness is the fruit of prayer and penance: prayer, because it enables us to focus on the Lord; penance, to restrain our inclination to put 'me' first, which is the essence of our sinfulness.

Watchfulness or alertness is a spiritual (meaning 'of the Holy Spirit') quality that is deeply associated with our taking the call to be saints with seriousness.

The first part of Advent focuses on the second coming of the Lord. Those who are prayerful and penitential will be ready for it when it happens and will not in any way be looking for ways of controlling it. Like the first coming, it will be a gift.

Pray for Christian alertness.

SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT

JOHN THE BAPTIST - A MAN OF PENANCE

Isaiah 40, 1-5 & 9-11; 2 Peter 3, 8-14; Mark 1, 1-8

John presents as a severe figure - no life of luxury for the one whose task is to challenge the people to get ready for their messiah. John's message is expressed in his ascetic way of life: wilderness, basic food and clothing and being a symbol of everything that he says by word of mouth.

John lives what we call 'penance'. There is no gap between what John says and what he lives. If John's lifestyle is penitential, it is because he is totally available for the mission that God has entrusted to him. His is the task to proclaim repentance for the forgiveness of sins. The baptism he offers is a sign of this repentance.

It is worth pondering two aspects of John's way of life and his message. First, it is not a gloomy message. What can be more positive than announcing reconciliation with God? This is grace 'big time' and it is thoroughly worthwhile to re-orientate one's whole life in that direction. This is comfort and reassurance indeed. The coming of the Messiah is "good news", not gloomy news. Grace, as such a coming is, needs preparation. That too is part of John's invitation.

Secondly, the role of penance in the life of those who hear the message of grace or good news: a life based on penance is a life re-orientated towards God. It is a life that is so arranged as to deal with sin and its destructive effect.

John's call to penance is permanently valid. For us, who live after the coming of Christ and everything that he has achieved for us, we still have to deal with sin and its effects. Any penance, including our newly discovered weekly penance of abstinence on Fridays, is a work of grace and is a permanent sign of the working of grace. Our task is to live (like John) in a way that shows grace at work and a leaving behind sin and all its allurements.

Pray for the grace of repentance.

THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT

ONLY CHRIST MATTERS (REJOICE)

Isaiah 61, 1-2: 10-11; 1 Thessalonians 5, 16-24; John 1, 6-18: 19-28

John's greatness is totally based on his relationship with Jesus. His whole reality was orientated to his Redeemer. Everything he was and did reflected that.

John did not attempt to make himself in any way a smaller version of the Christ he announced. His task and his whole reality was to be a voice preparing the way. The One coming after him was the One who matters. John himself was determined that he should not get in the way to any degree.

John's personal holiness is drawn from the One he prepares for. His relationship with Jesus had to be right and it could only be right if John remained a voice announcing the good news that the Messiah was knocking on the door. John is firm that he is not going to get in the way of Jesus.

His particular service in the ways of the Lord was to prepare. The One to come was the Spirit-filled Messiah of the Lord. John could prepare; but Jesus was the only one who could provide what the human heart at its best yearns for - to be one with its creator.

John's holiness or his status as a saint is precisely that he allowed his particular calling to be his only identity - John is honoured by us because he was faithful to his calling and refused to accept any other designation of himself. He was the witness to the light, who is Jesus.

To become saints in our own time, we are called to recognise and live that service for the light that God has called us to be and to offer.

Pray for holiness.

FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT

MARY'S HOLINESS - FULL OF GRACE

2 Samuel 7, 1-5: 8-12: 14-16; Romans 16, 25-27; Luke 1, 26-38

The Church has never had any doubts about Mary's sinlessness. Sin had no part of her life. She was in grace from the first moment of her existence.

We celebrate that in the Immaculate Conception. Mary, redeemed by her Son, is full of grace in the most complete fashion. God's work of art in our history is the Incarnation and Redemption, the fruits of which are available to every person and the whole of creation.

Mary is an important part of that work of art. It is staggering that God approached a creature for her assent to be the way God became a part of his own creation, in order to win back that creation from ruin.

Mary's "be it done to me according to your word" is the most powerful expression of the road to holiness.

Mary did not just utter this prayer; she then lived it to the full. She became a vehicle of the ways of God. She became an icon of what Paul calls the obedience of faith, which is the fundamental ingredient of all holiness. We accept the Lord's will for us (faith) and we live it obediently.

The obedience of faith is the opposite of sin. Sin is the creature doing its own thing. Mary accepts and then lives God's thing, which is the redemption for the whole of creation through Jesus Christ.

Mary's holiness, which the Church acknowledges and venerates, is being always with her Son in mind and heart and spirit and lived to the full.

Pray for the Obedience of Faith.

CHRISTMAS

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

THE GIFT

The custom of exchanging gifts at Christmas is, at its best, a reflection of the only gift worthwhile. There is only one gift at Christmas, and that is the personal presence of Jesus, the Son of God. Our gift-giving degenerates into an empty commercialism or pale recognition of important relations if it loses touch with the original gift, which is profoundly personal and can only retain its value by remaining personal.

The gift we celebrate is the embodiment of love. It has endorsed love as the most precious element in the way we relate to each other. The only gift God gives us is himself in the person of Jesus Christ. Jesus is the sign and total expression of his Father's love for us. It is given so that we can come to know God - and so that we can come to know each other.

The gift of Christ to us is the only model of our gift to each other. Only genuine love can bring us humans to true humanity.

We are made in the image and likeness of God, but it is only when that image is thriving that we thrive. Love is about giving; not the giving of material things (no matter how symbolic they are of us) but the giving of ourselves to each other and ultimately to God. The tragedy of atheism is that the source of our humanity is denied and humanity is closed in on itself.

Christmas calls us to live the sort of life that makes it plain that our humanness comes from God. The attempts to do it ourselves, even at their best, are quite ugly. Look at the Child of Bethlehem and we see our humanity as God wanted it to be.

Christmas is no escape from reality. It is the beginning of our recovery of our humanity.

Pray for the gift of genuine love.

SOLEMNITY OF THE MOTHER OF GOD

THE MOTHER OF THE GIFT

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

Christians of many traditions, especially of more recent provenance e.g. from the Reformation, find it quite difficult to understand how the more Catholic and Eastern traditions can make such a fuss of Mary.

This tradition seems to say something like this - Mary, marvellous as she is, remains a creature; and creatures are always affected by sin. Redemption, the antidote to sin, is exclusively a divine initiative and the only role a creature can play is to receive the fruits of that redemption by faith. They can have no active role in bringing about redemption. In this view Mary's co-operation with God's initiative is something that makes little sense.

In the Catholic tradition, Mary's co-operation as theotokos (literally 'God bearer' i.e. the Mother of God) is the work of grace and is also a genuine work of co-operation with that grace. Mary lives what we aspire to; and so she has a very important place in the life of the Church.

She is the first face of the divine blessing which is Jesus our Lord. She will always remain that face, even though the blessing she bore is now permanently with a human face, in the person of Jesus risen from the dead.

The blessing of Aaron which we read from the book of Numbers is ultimately fulfilled in the Incarnation. But it is reflected powerfully in the person of the mother of our Lord. Through her "fiat", Mary is an essential part of that blessing becoming historical fact.

"The Lord bless you and keep you,
the Lord make his face shine upon you
and be gracious unto you,
the Lord lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace."

The popularity of Mary's shrines and centres of pilgrimage is because, one way or another, pilgrims find the face of God in Mary's Son. And always associated with that Son is Mary herself.

Pray to find God's face in Jesus and his mother.

THE EPIPHANY

FOR ALL PEOPLE - THE GENTILES ALSO

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

The mystery of the God-man will always confront us with the mystery of being human and what it means.

It is odd that God makes choices from among all his creatures. Possibly the oddest choice of all is that, from all the peoples of the earth, he chose one people to achieve his end and purpose. It almost seems that God renounces his power to achieve everything he wants directly without any "middle-agent" in order to do things in a certain way. We are confronted by the mystery of divine particularity - he chooses one and not another.

Does this mean that God loves some and not others? Not at all. It means that God works in ways that somehow fit in with the way we are. We are particular even though it is possible to generalise about us. God takes the particular very seriously and through the particular God reaches out to all.

In the way God offers his salvation (covenant), he operates through the particular - the Jews - and he uses that people to achieve his purpose. That people is also a beneficiary of God's purposes, but not exclusively. The Epiphany does not rub out the particularity of the Jews.

The Magi come looking for the King of the Jews. It highlights that the Jews were the people, chosen by God and remaining chosen by God, through whom the One who brings eternal blessings for everyone comes into our history.

It is a manifestation of our sinfulness to think that, once God has achieved his purpose through the Jews, he discards them. As redemption becomes a possibility for all people, that all people will always include the people originally chosen.

In the story of the Magi, Herod represents sinful humanity. We sinners, Jews or Gentiles, will always resist what God is doing and how he is doing it, but the saving love of God, manifest in Christ, will ultimately overcome our worst sinfulness.

God's choice will always have the last word. The last word is that Christ becomes one of us for everyone.

Pray for our Jewish brothers and sisters.

END NOTE

With the Epiphany being celebrated so late, the Feast of the Baptism of the Lord falls on a weekday.

The Baptism is an end note to our celebration of the Lord's coming 2011/12, but it is an essential statement made each year that the Lord came to carry out something for us that only he could achieve. The Lord's baptism identifies him with a sinful and alienated human race and yet being and remaining the Sinless One.

His baptism is not a game play. It is announcing very plainly that Jesus, the Sinless One, comes to deal with our sins, not from outside but from the inside. The love of God for us is so great that Jesus identifies with sinners in order to break the hold of sin in their lives and free them for God. The rest of the story about the baby of Bethlehem is about that and we are the beneficiaries of what happened.