

Second Sunday of Advent

6th December 2009

Year C

Anyone who sees the weeks approaching Christmas through the eyes of children knows the excited expectation they experience: the shopping trips, the visits to Santa, the wrapping of presents, the decoration of the tree and house and so on all build up an excitement of anticipation and expectation of the future delights of Christmas Day itself. Some adults have lost this feeling, weighed down with the burden of the financial cost, the work involved and the general busyness of the season.

Advent tries to recapture this excitement. The readings awaken us to two things about which we might kindle a sense of expectation. First we put ourselves back into the time when the prophets were preparing God's people for the coming of Christ. Malachi 3.1-14 foretells a messenger who will prepare the way of the Lord and Luke 3. 1-6 tells of the ministry of John the Baptist, quoting from Isaiah's prophecy of his mission to prepare the way for the salvation of God. Secondly, we need to kindle a sense of expectation about the second coming of Christ, the advent of the reign of Christ when the whole world will acknowledge him as Lord.

"all flesh shall see the salvation of God" (Luke 3.6) yet we cannot produce our own salvation. We acknowledge this fact and look to when the reign of Christ will come in its fullness. We repent of the sins of the world, not just our own sins and omissions but also for the whole world which cannot share with justice the resources of the earth, which sees violence and war as means of settling disputes, which distrusts people of different race and country. But as well as repenting of wrong-doing we also look forward in hope, in joyful anticipation to a time when the good works which we know are happening and which we ourselves are involved because of Jesus' command to love our neighbour, will come to completion on the day of Christ. Phil. 1.1-11 speaks of this.

Maranatha, come Lord Jesus! Let us pray in joyful expectation of God's grace to fill our lives with the knowledge and discernment to do what is right as we await the time when Christ's coming will bring his reign of peace and love.

Third Sunday of Advent

13th December 2009

Year C

John the Baptist pointed the way to Jesus. At first sight, John's message appears anything but good news. He calls the crowds a brood of vipers. He criticizes them for their arrogance and predicts judgement and death. Yet the crowds flocked to him for advice about what they needed to do. Share what you have, don't be greedy, be just, he said. So impressed were the people that they thought he might be the coming messiah. But no, he said, I merely point the way. His good news pointed to one greater than he, one who would come with the power of the Spirit, one who would bring judgment.

John the Baptist can be a role model. It may not have been easy for him to be so self-effacing and humble. There were those who were his followers, those who would proclaim him as messiah. Those who would follow his teaching (In fact, the Manicheans today are a remnant of his disciples). But John's 'good news' was the proclamation of Jesus who would come after him.

Sometimes today we recognize people whose lives are outstanding in their service to others. We want to pour accolades on them and raise them in status but their greatness lies in pointing us to Jesus. Desmond Tutu, Nelson Mandela, Mother Teresa, are some of the saints of our time whose lives have been given in the service of others, yet all of them point to Jesus as the one they serve. You will think of others.

Each of us is called to live our lives so that others will be pointed to Christ. The words 'rejoice' and 'joy' are heard today in Zeph. 3.14-20 and Phil.4.4-7. Lives lived with joy point to our Lord: joy of the good things of creation, the joy we have because Jesus came to live an earthly life, the joy of forgiveness, the joy of resurrection and new life' the joy of the hope that his kingdom will be fulfilled, the joy that we can speak to God in prayer. Advent is a season of joy and hopeful expectation as we think of these things. May our joyful lives point others to Jesus.

First Sunday after Christmas

27th December 2009

Year C

Over Christmas we see many pictures of the holy family in nativity plays, on Christmas cards. Many people sentimentalise the perfection of the family. We know very little about their life and relationships. Luke 2. 41-52 is one of the few references to Jesus' family in the Bible.

Mary nurtured in her heart those events from Jesus' birth which indicated that he was no ordinary child. What dread might have been mixed with the joy of finding the lost Jesus in the Temple and hearing him claim the Temple as his father's house? How true is her outburst, "Why have you treated us like this?" 'The parents suffered the anguish of a three day search for him, joy at finding him, and perplexity at the assuredness of his reason for being with the scholars. Mary treasured these things in her heart', knowing he was special yet possibly knowing that he was not going to be her child forever.

Many parents find it difficult to accept the choices their children make and the paths they take in life. You may know the confusion of parents whose child has decided to take a low-paid creative position rather than follow in the parents' more lucrative professions; or the concern when a child has decided to enter the religious life or seek ordination. (cf Francis of Assisi, Albert Schweitzer) More difficult still are those situations where parents struggle with their children's choice of alternative lifestyles, sexual orientation, of living with someone before marriage, or of getting involved with the drug culture or dubious friends.

To love is to continue to love the child, even if he/she makes choices they disapprove of. Love requires that you give freedom (even to 12 year olds as Mary found) appropriate to the age and maturity of the child. This is no easy thing as Mary found. For eventually the child is not yours. Mature parents need to let go yet continue to love. Mary's love and anguish as a mother were profound. We have other glimpses of her in the gospels: her distress at his Nazareth ministry, her pride in Cana, her anguish at the cross, her sadness at his death.

Parenthood brings a strange mixture of feelings: pride, anger, frustration, worry, confusion, distress. Mary and Joseph continued to love and care for Jesus through all this and he grew both in size and wisdom and became an adult whose authenticity and integrity pleased both God and the people around him. We can look to them as role models.

The Birth of Our Lord Christmas Day

25th December 2009

Year C

The first paragraph of the story of the birth of Jesus in today's Gospel (Luke 2.1-20) gives a very ordinary account of what seems to be an ordinary child. It is the story of the shepherds which tells us he is no ordinary child and in doing so reveals something of his nature and mission in the world. Heavenly angels declare the child's glory to the lowliest in society. Here is God who has sought out the poor and weak in order to raise them up and give them hope.

Isaiah 62.12 reminds us that God is one who seeks us out. So often we believe that we are on a search for God but it is the opposite. So much of the New Testament points to a God who comes to us, who seeks us out: the parables of the lost, the call of the disciples, the challenge to Zacchaeus, and the coming of the Holy Spirit with power, all point to God as the one who seeks and finds. The birth of a child, God come to us, God with us, is the prime action of his search to bring us to him.

The festival of Christmas is a celebration of the Incarnation, the great salvation event in which God sent his only son to live with us and draw us back to him. He came searching for the lost to bring them back to God, he came with compassion that we might be whole, he came humbly and self-sacrificially to give life to others. He revealed to us the nature of God and showed us how to be children of God.

Christ alone is the child of God by nature; but we can become children of God by grace and adoption, not by what we do but by humbly submitting ourselves to God's grace in baptism and then daily being renewed by the Spirit of God to live our lives as Christ did: in humility, in compassion, in self-giving, in seeking the lost and bringing them home to him.

When we celebrate the Birth of our Lord, it is not just the celebration of the birthday of Jesus. It is much more than that. It is the celebration of the great mystery of God who sought us out and reveals himself to us in a lowly, ordinary child, so that we might too become children of God .

Fourth Sunday of Advent

20th December 2009

Year C

In Advent we consider the place of the Blessed Virgin Mary in our faith. We call her 'blessed' because of the way she is described in Luke 1.39-56 — three times in the introductory paragraph and again in the Song of Mary—'from now on all generations will call me blessed'.

Two closely-related reasons are given for calling Mary 'blessed'. The first is her faithful obedience. She believed in the word she received from the Lord and faithfully said 'yes' to what God asked of her (v. 45) and the fact that she was the mother of Jesus (v.42). So Mary is blessed not primarily for who she is herself but for her part in the incarnation of Christ.

As Luke told the story of the conception and the meeting of Elizabeth and Mary, he did not dwell on Christ's divinity, but rather on the raising up of a leader in the house of David. His miraculous conception looked forward to a person who would have a unique role in salvation. God's promise to Mary (vv.32-33) was about what her child would become: what he would be called in the future, his future throne in the line of David, his future reign over the house of Judah and a kingdom without end. God's mighty deeds in the past are a promise of his future action (The Magnificat) No doubt Mary, at that stage, did not understand him as the incarnate Son of God or the way in which he would bring about salvation. The writer to Hebrews (Heb.10.5-10) reminds us that the purpose of the incarnation is to bring about atonement with God, a state produced only by the forgiveness of sins through Jesus' death on the cross.

Mary's faithful obedience were necessary for God to act in history. That young lass in Nazareth knew nothing of theology or politics but she listened to God and did as he asked, little knowing either the joy or anguish her decision to obey would bring, yet she was part of God's action in history. We pray that we will be like Mary, listening deeply to what he wants of us, faithfully obeying, and willingly experiencing the joy and anguish which results because we know that we are involved in his salvation of the world.