

MEDITATIONS  
FOR ADVENT AND CHRISTMAS  
(ALL SUNDAYS, AND FEASTS OF THE CYCLE)

## **Advent IA**

The people of God find their unity in the word of the living God. The faith thus engendered by the power of God's word makes the community of the faithful begin to grow. Through the repeated preaching of the Church they are summoned to conversion and holiness. This is certainly part of the Advent cry - and a preparation for receiving the Lord when he comes.

Today we begin to read from the great Advent prophet Isaiah. He begins with a messianic prophecy of lasting peace. 'In the days to come the mountain of the Temple of Yahweh shall tower above the mountains and be lifted higher than the hills. All the nations will stream to it, peoples without number will come to it: and they will say: "Come let us go up to the mountain of the Lord to the Temple of the God of Jacob..." We read on and come upon those proverbial lines which unfortunately have never been realised: "They will hammer their swords in ploughshares, their spears into sickles." Here is a passionate plea for an end to the arms race, which is the agonised cry of our times.

In the second reading a passage from St. Paul's letter to the Romans takes up the same call - let us purify ourselves. Let us walk in the new light of day and in place of the panoply of war let us put on the heavenly armour of Jesus Christ.

The gospel text for the first year of the cycle is taken from St. Matthew and it continues the same theme: let us stay awake and exercise vigilance because the coming of the Son of Man may take place at any moment. We will not be given the luxury of prior notice.

We are always alert when it comes to something that we consider to be in our immediate interests. We are quick to spot an opening when it is a question of our own personal aggrandisement. What we need to do is to bring the same degree of care to the living of our Christian lives. Then only can we make same return for the outpouring of God's love for us that we are preparing to celebrate at Christmas.

The season of Advent begins a new year in the liturgy of the Church. This four-week period of meditation and prayer prepares the way for the coming of Jesus. He is the Prince of Peace and he comes as saviour of his people. Advent is the heartfelt cry of all God's people down the ages. It

contains a note of longing and intense desire - Jesus is the 'desired of the nations.' Together with the note of longing and desire there is the motif of waiting. This is the passive, feminine aspect of human nature - the anima, waiting for God, and waiting for love. There has been no era in the history of the world when people did not experience the need for a redeemer. Many Messiahs have been expected and many have proved delusory. In our own times Communism has promised people a new beginning and a world transformed, but nothing has happened. We are left with lies and subterfuge and repression.

The great Old Testament prophet Isaiah of Jerusalem held out to his people the hope of the only authentic Messiah. "He will wield authority over the nations and adjudicate between many peoples." (2.3 This is the Christ whom the prophets of the Old Law and the saints of the new have longed to behold.

St. Anselm in his Proslogion voices the desire 'Come then, Lord my God, come and instruct my heart where and how to *search for you where and how* to find you. Where shall I look for you Lord if you are absent and not here' (Ch. 1)

St. John of the Cross-expresses *the* longing of the prophets in his great poetry.

"Others cried, Came Lord and end it  
Him you have promised sends him now!  
Others: 'If only you would sunder  
Those skies, and to my sight allow."  
"The vision of yourself descending  
To make my lamentations cease;  
Cloud in the height, rain down upon us  
That the earth may find release."

God wants to come into our hearts to fill them with Himself. That is why he became man, became one of ourselves to make it easy for us to identify with Him. Now we can recognise the almighty, now we can see, hear and touch the Word. He wants to be more present to us than we are to ourselves, a presence in love and for love. The Spirit will help us to stifle the voices within us that clamour like noonday and listen instead to the still small voice that whispers at evening. God's love enfleshed, incarnate, will fill the emptiness of our creaturehood and draw it into the realm of the divine. Only a loving sigh or prayer separates us from Heaven but a continued refusal to sigh for God keeps us worlds apart.

## **Advent 2**

Here again today the word of God begins with a beautiful Messianic prophecy from Isaiah. The prophet's vision is of a new beginning from a different branch of the same family.

**Is. 11<sup>th</sup>** "A shoot shall spring from the stock of Jesse" This image has been depicted traditionally in stained glass in English churches and Cathedrals and it is known as the "Jesse window."

This passage in a marvellous way points to a messiah, a saviour, to Jesus. This figure will be filled with the gifts of the spirit.

"On him the spirit of the Lord rests,  
A spirit of wisdom and insight  
A spirit of counsel and power  
A spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the Lord."

Only six gifts are enumerated here and when we add the gift of 'pietas' or piety we have the traditional seven gifts of the Holy Spirit. "In thy seven-fold gifts descend." These gifts were given to Jesus and he communicates them to us. They are the energies we need to put things straight again in our personal lives, and in the world. The Bishop solemnly prayed that each one of us would receive these gifts at our confirmation. We need these gifts to heal our wounds and to make us whole again. For many years now there has been a great interest and adherence to the outpouring of the gifts of

the spirit in the Charismatic or Renewal movement. We need knowledge to understand God's plan of salvation, we need wisdom to evaluate life and balance it against eternity. We need to seek God's will in the situations that arise each day and we need the gift of counsel to apply the teaching of the Christian faith to the daily situations of life. Finally we need the fortitude and the courage to work together to know and serve God better,

Isaiah goes on to paint an idyllic picture in this passage.

"The wolf lies down with the lamb,  
The panther lies down with the kid,  
Calf and lion cub feed together  
With a little boy to lead them  
They do no hurt on all my Holy Mountain."

Here the prophet is suggesting that the regeneration of human society will be accompanied by the restoration of the harmony that prevailed at creation. (Gen. Is. 65 ,25)

The peaceful situation envisaged by Isaiah of Jerusalem doesn't seem to belong to this world , yet he himself wrote in the midst of war and turmoil. At any moment people were expecting the Assyrian armies to swoop down and carry them off. But faith for Isaiah included the current political situation - God has full power to deliver from harm. The prophet was trying to nourish an Irrepressible Messianic hope in the hearts of his own people. This hope springs from a religious conviction that God' s will and control ought to prevail in the world.

The religious person is convinced that the world has been created by a supremely good God and that evil is an intrusion, something that intervenes to destroy God's plan. But war and destruction cannot prevail because God can intervene to restore the original state of affairs.

Things haven't really changed all that much. The same disordered instincts in human hearts that led to war thousands of years ago are responsible for the situations which we have today around the . In this situation the passage selected from St. Paul to the Romans is most appropriate.

"Everything that was written long ago in the scriptures was meant to teach us something about hope. From the examples scripture gives us of how people who did not give up were helped by God." What is needed is a constant undercurrent of loyalty and fidelity to God in the here and now. Events and the things that happen to us are often unpredictable and so we need an unchanging fidelity to the course upon which we have embarked. We might call this attitude by the old-fashioned name perseverance, but this is what is implied. 'Faithfulness' according to scripture is the hallmark of God's dealings with us and so we ought to respond on our part by fidelity. Our love for God must be enduring or it disappears without trace. Let us remind ourselves today of

The uncompromising message of John the Baptist in the Gospel of St. Matthew. John is an Unromantic figure: his message is not calculated to make us feel a rosy glow of self-satisfaction. Instead his words hit us head on:

**Mt. 3.**

"Repent for the kingdom of Heaven is close at hand." John the Baptist was no respecter of finer feelings. The words he used in addressing the Pharisees are anything but complimentary. In fact we perhaps feel a little uneasy about this kind of language. We would prefer if he had tempered his stone somewhat and not sounded quite so uncompromising. Nowadays we don't like to antagonise people and so the strongest term we use is 'unhelpful' for views with which we do not agree.

For this reason, we do need to be shaken out of our complacency by the loud voice of prophetic doom with which John the Baptist speaks. Otherwise we might find ourselves being lulled to sleep when we should be watchful and awake. The issues are too serious and we cannot play lightly with eternal life. He who is to come will not tolerate compromise either. 'He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.'

**Advent 3 A**

The first note in today's liturgy is an air of joy. 'gaudete' 'rejoice in the Lord always.' This call probably made more impact in the days when people did more in the way of physical penance and they needed to be cheered up.

The Advent prayer continues on a deeper level. "Come Lord and save us. (Resp. psalm). The theme of coming, as we might expect, is particularly prominent. God comes to us in so many different ways and at so many different times. He should remember that this coming has three tenses, past, present and future - he came, he comes and he will come again. The Lord comes now to knock on our doors. But we can sometimes be so engrossed in a thousand other things that we lack the perception to recognise him. Jesus comes to us as our loving saviour and friend and this is how we should think of him today. The Lord always comes to renew and

The same Lord who came once to this earth is with us when we gather to celebrate the Eucharist. Our meeting with the Lord in the Eucharist is designed to nourish us and to comfort us as we journey through life. This is an experience, which is meant to give meaning to everything we do, to colour and influence our attitudes to others - the people we know, the people we meet.

Again today in the first reading we listen to the consoling words of the great prophet Isaiah:

"The glory of Lebanon is bestowed on it, the splendour of Carmel and Sharon

They shall see the glory of the Lord the splendour of our God.

Strengthen all weary hands, steady all trembling knees and say to all faint hearts,

"Courage does not be afraid. Look your God is coming."

When we turn to the Gospel of today we will find that the whole prophecy comes alive before our eyes. But first let us take a look at John the Baptist, the advent precursor of the Lord.

St. Matthew tells us that John has been confined to prison for his 'offensive' remarks about the ruling regime of his day. We notice his deep despondency - it was indeed a time of trial and despair for John. John's mission had been to prepare people for a great change for the better, a new spiritual development. But he did not seem to get very far. As so often happens in our own day, criticism of the moral conduct of the ruling classes landed him in prison. John felt that people were at a turning-point

and he was right. There had seemed to be a veil of silence, which lasted for centuries, and the expectations of the people had not been fulfilled. John now proclaimed that the time had arrived.

Some observers today see our ages as akin to the area of great change in the past. Is there a fresh phase of the history of mankind round the corner? Many people would answer in the affirmative. The great technological advances, the increasing impetus of the feminist movement, the breakdown in religious and moral values all seem to suggest the advent of a new era. Certainly some of these elements were present in past periods of momentous change. The Roman Empire collapsed, not so much from the barbarian invasions as from decline and disintegration from within. Similarly the rise of the Renaissance in the 16th century, the invention of the printing press, the progress of humanism, all this gave enormous impetus to the new thinking, the Reformation in Germany, the rest of Europe and then in Britain.

The ferment of those days shook the old Church to its foundations. Of course all this might not have happened if the Church had put its own house in order, rather than have been weakened by the high living of Renaissance Popes and high ecclesiastics like Cardinal Wolsey here in England. Great civilisations have disappeared without a trace and we have no divine guarantee that our western culture is going to survive or survive much longer. That is why the Church, like John the Baptist, must be prepared for persecution. Within forty years of the death of Jesus, the Emperor Nero used the Christians as human torches to light up his palace gardens.

In the gospel today, Jesus for the benefit of John languishing in prison, identifies himself as the messianic figure foreseen by Isaiah. The gospel record tells us of his compassion in dealing with the sick and suffering.

Isaiah had written: "Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, the ears of the deaf unsealed, then the lame shall leap like a deer and the tongues of the dumb sing for joy".

Jesus tells the messengers: "Go back and tell John what you hear and see, the blind see again, and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear and the dead are raised to life and the Good News is proclaimed to the poor."



There is often, we must admit, a divorce between our faith and its actual impact on our lives. Most of us have little difficulty in believing that God is well disposed to his creatures, but we somehow still manage to feel that things are up to ourselves after that. For instance, in some serious difficulty or illness we would find it very hard to summon up enough faith to promise ourselves a miracle. And yet we know from places like Lourdes that miracles do happen. It is simply that we cannot believe that the Lord will take a hand in our particular case. It is easier to think that God will refrain from intervening to change the course of events. We feel we had better make alternative arrangements and not bank too much on outside assistance - even from God. We will certainly be tempted to feel that God does not take an active part in our lives and consequently we fail in trust. But Jesus said, "Blessed is he who does not lose confidence in me." (Mt. 11. 3) Let us not overlook either St. James' exhortation in the second reading today. "Be patient, brothers, until the Lord's coming. Think of a farmer: how patiently he waits for the precious fruit of the ground until it has the autumn rains and the spring rains."

#### **James 5. 7**

Our confidence grows when we refuse to lose heart. We must continue to trust in God no matter what the outcome. If there is one thing we should learn from Christian history and personal experience it is this - God is never closer to us than when he seems furthest away. It is our unlimited confidence in him that bridges the apparent gap.

#### **Advent 4**

The word of God for the fourth Sunday of Advent is, as we might expect, full of the thought of God's immediate presence to his people. Again we should ponder on the rich Messianic content of the passage from the Prophet Isaiah. The context of this reading was one of tension and danger for God's people. The reigning King Ahaz was being threatened by the forces of Babylon and instead of relying on the power of the Lord he was trying to arrange an alliance with the Assyrians - the Suro-Ephraimite alliance. This amounted to virtual rejection of the Lord and he came under prophetic censure as a result. The King is offered a sign of God's help but he rejects it with contempt. He is given a sign

nonetheless and it is a mysterious one: "It is this: the maiden is with child and will soon give birth to a Son, whom she will call Immanuel, a name which means 'God-is-with-us.'"

In refusing a sign the King is rejecting the Covenant with, but in spite of this the divine promise will prevail. We do not know whom the prophet had in mind but we may take it to be Hezekiah, soon to be born. Any 'Davidic' King was the bearer of the divine promise. In the Puller meaning of the sign the child is Jesus who, as the Gospel tells us, was the son of David. Jesus, born from the Virgin Mary is most perfectly 'God-is-with-us' Immanuel. The second reading is from, the beginning of St. Paul's great letter to the Romans. He immediately takes up this theme. "The Gospel is about the Son of God, who according, to the human nature that he took, was a descendant of David. Here Paul recognises with the early Church that Jesus is the Davidic Messiah.

All these themes are brought together in the Gospel for today. When Matthew sits down to complete his Gospel, he has one eye on the scriptures of the Old Testament. Matthew among the four evangelists is the one who most consciously presents Jesus as the fulfilment of Old Testament hopes. In the very first verse of his Gospel Jesus is described as the 'Son of David.' So also is Joseph! In the first chapter of the Gospel he presents Jesus as the fulfilment of the Isaiah prophecy of the first reading, using the same language and quoting part of the passage.

"She will give birth to a son and you must name him Jesus." This mysterious divine revelation came to Joseph in a dream, just as the Lord had revealed the prototype to Ahaz.

On the fourth Sunday in Advent the Church is poised to celebrate what St. John of the Cross would call 'the sweet mystery of the incarnation! The same Spirit who illumined the minds of the prophets to look forward in hope to a future saviour now begets the son of God in the chaste womb of the Virgin Mary. Matthew states undramatically the tremendous fact of a virgin birth. He repeats this fact a second time using the words of the heavenly messenger. "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because she has conceived what is in her by the Holy Spirit." He goes on to cite the prophecy of Isaiah. 111 Matthew, quoting, from " Greek Septuagint version uses the word 'parthenus' meaning virgin. In the original Hebrew however the word 'Alma' is used which

means a 'young woman'. 'Beltalah' was the Hebrew word for virgin. Matthew states explicitly that these, events took place "to fulfil the words spoken by the Lord through the prophet." It is clear from this that Matthew is making an explicit statement regarding the virgin birth of Christ. We might say that Matthew puts more emphasis on the fact (repeated twice) that the birth of Jesus proceeds from the direct action of the Holy Spirit.

Mary the virgin is the silent witness to all this drama. She ponders silently the marvellous ways of God. She does not defend herself to the betrothed husband Joseph but is apparently ready to abide by his decision to cancel the forthcoming marriage.

On Christmas Day we will contemplate the incarnate saviour in the arms of his mother. She can best help us to prepare for His coming. Mary's meditation of God's word aid her deep contemplative prayer is a model for all Christians and especially for the Carmelite. We do not know to what extent Mary and Joseph grasped the full extent of God's plans for his people. In fact to try to gauge the degree of their faith would amount to an intrusion in their contemplative intimacy with God. The continued silence of Mary and Joseph hint at the profound mysteries of God's election.

All the promises of two thousand years are now entrusted to the keeping of these two. God had found them worthy of his choice. Mary, as the prayer over the gifts says, "was sanctified by the power of the Spirit and Joseph was, as the Gospel tells us 'a just man'.

During many years of Christian tradition the sound of the Angelus bell recalls this supreme divine intervention. The concluding prayer of this beautiful commemoration is taken from the Collect for today.

"Lord, fill our hearts with your love and, as you revealed to us by an angel the coming of your Son as man, so lead us through His suffering and death to the glory of His resurrection."

## **1 Advent B**

The Sunday liturgy today begins with a beautiful passage from the 'advent' book - Isaiah. It refers to God as 'Our Father'. There is only one other place in the Old Testament where God is referred to by the intimate name father and that occurs in the book of Tobit, 13. 4. Only Jesus revealed

God fully to us in the Sermon on the Mount as truly 'Our Father.' This passage today is a psalm of lamentation. It describes past blessings, outlines present needs and prays for opportune help. The prophet recalls the marvellous deeds of the Lord in the past, which brought about the liberation of his people. God is also here addressed as Redeemer Goel) which is so full of significance for the future. Because of the people's infidelity their very fathers in the flesh, Abraham and Jacob have disowned them but in this extremity they can turn to God as their father and ask him to renew his Covenant with them. The prophet prays earnestly for God's presence, for a theophany.

This is the advent prayer, which we find answered in Mark 110. "No sooner had he came up out of the water than he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending on him like a dove." The prophet continues to confess the sins of his people, which is what the Church now calls us to do during this time of preparation for Christmas.

The lovely image of the Potter illustrates the sovereignty of God and the complete dependence of the people on him as such - no more than clay in his hands to be moulded to any he desires.

The theme of the coming of the future judge of all mankind is given prominence in the word of God today. Our attention is drawn to St. Paul's opening words of his Letter to the Corinthians. "He will keep you steady and without blame until the last day, the day of our Lord Jesus Christ." (1 Cor. 9). This promised second coming of Christ is an essential part of the Christian message. We go on to profess it in the Nicene Creed. "He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead." St. Cyril of Jerusalem in his 'Catechetical Instructions' underlines this point of faith: "I am not going to teach you about only the coming of Christ but also about a much more glorious second coming. In his first coming Christ gave us an example of patient endurance, but when he comes again "he will bring the crown of the Kingdom of God."

Every time we say the 'Our Father' we say the words MW Kingdom Come. 1 As the season of Advent comes round again the Church urges us to adopt this attitude of waiting and praying for the lord's coming and the realisation of his reign in the world.

The Kingdom of God began, we might say, with the creation of the world, but more specifically with God's choice of a people as the vehicle for His plan of salvation. He did this through personal intervention in the fortunes or misfortunes of this people - namely by stepping into their history and bringing about their liberation from slaving in Egypt.

The birth of Jesus at Bethlehem was the turning point and the crucial event in all God's dealings with the world, he has made. But even this wonderful event didn't bring about an idyllic state of affairs - the Kingdom of God continues to grow amid pain and struggle; its final and perfect form lies ahead; sometime in the unforeseeable future.

Revelation in fact leaves us very much in the dark regarding the circumstances of the second coming, of Christ which we have been discussing. There are many colourful and, I might say, frightening features given in the scriptures about the end of the world. Some Christian denominations tend to take these apocalyptic features too literally. The best approach is to try to gain a broader understanding of the whole context of this kind of imagery. In the Gospel today St. Mark gives us Jesus' own summing-up of what he had been saying about the 'eschata' the 'end things'! The message is this: 'Be on your guard, stay awake, because you never know when the time will come.' This is a sober call to exercise vigilance in the way we live so that we can give an account of ourselves to the Lord at a moments notice.

In the meantime we know that Christ has died and rose again from the dead and by so doing he has effectively curbed the power of evil in the world. But at the same time God's reign, his victory is very much something hidden, even invisible - there can as yet be no hoisting of the flag or beating of drums or reviewing of the troops.

We need faith to be able to accept the fact that God's grace is working among us at the present day. This, however, does not mean that everything will go right for us; we are still subject to illness - suffering from physical and psychological weakness. It does mean that Jesus is with us to ease our difficulties and to assure us of a happy ending to our affairs. In spite of the weight of evil that seems to sway us, we cannot believe that an omnipotent God is powerless in the face of evil.

It is of no avail to know the Gospel message if we are not going to allow ourselves to be saved by it. The Gospel has not yet worked its way into our hearts if we say it may well work for others but riot for me. We cannot have a religious and secular view of things at one and the same time. 'The Church prays each Advent that each member of the community may meet Christ in a new and life-giving way.

## **2 Advent B**

The Word of God opens today with a strong promise of deliverance from the Lord.

"Console my people, console them, says your God.

Speak to the heart of Jerusalem

and call to her that her time of service in ended

that her sin is atoned for..."

This is the beginning of the prophecy of Deuter-Isaiah, a hope which ranks among the greatest examples of Hebrew poetic literature. It was written by a disciple of the great Isaiah of Jerusalem in the final period of the Babylonian exile prior to their return. It contains the urgent cry of a people who felt themselves trapped and stranded in the desert. The prophet promises them that they will be set free, that they will return to their own land. The reading is in the form of a dialogue - the prophet, God and two other voices. The Lord speaks tenderly to his people that they have now atoned for their sins. The good news is that the Lord is coming. The Lord travels on the road with his people as in the first exodus from Egypt. His manifest holiness is evident and his glory will have to be acknowledged by all mankind. We are given a lovely picture of the Lord bearing salvation and this develops into the image of the shepherd carrying his sheep, an image which Jesus will later use so tellingly. We find the same idea in Ezechiel and also again in the Good Shepherd Psalm No. 22. God's people led to wait in exile until the time of their liberation arrived. As we turn to the second reading today St. Peter would seem to be pondering on this fact. "The Lord is not being slow to carry out his promises."

We must contrast God's eternity with the brief span of mortal life. It is not slowness that is involved by the Lord his way giving people the opportunity to repent. We find in this letter of St. Peter an emphasis on the future judgement - the Day of the Lord. **Mt 24, 43, 39** This will come like a thief, an image used by Jesus about himself in the Gospel. Here again we encounter examples of Jewish Apocalyptic with the vivid descriptions of final catastrophe. Everything melts and is consumed by fire.

In fact of this the scared writer urges on the people genuine repentance and the cultivation of a keen desire for the coming of the Saviour. Everything will be renewed as we read also in Ch.65 of Isaiah and God's 'righteousness' will prevail - which is characteristic of the messianic age.

We are God's people and we are always in need of salvation. The religious needs of people are very much the same whether it's a question of 3000 years ago, 9000 years or just this week. We need during the course of these weeks to listen to the consoling and healing promise of God's word. Every time we feel stress or worry, every time a relationship is strained or broken, whenever we are ill or bereaved, then like God's people we find ourselves in the desert. And the desert is not a nice place to be – we want to get out of it. But we must realise our need for God, we must feel our emptiness before we can call upon him. Being alive means being threatened by uncertainty. This is a part of the human condition. We are always worried about something, about our relatives, about how the children are getting on at school or how they will develop at a later stage. It is all very well for theologians to work out marvellous principles about the unchanging nature of God or about the grace of sacraments: but these things do not seem to impinge in us when it comes to the crunch. We seem to need something more radical than ideas, some way in which we can encounter the living God.

It is the task of the Church to pre-sent us with the vital, life giving message of Jesus each Sunday. The Gospel has not been superseded in any way after the lapse of 2000 years. Listen again to the proclamation of the Gospel: "The beginning of the Good News about Jesus Christ, the Son of God." Straight between the eyes. Mark is in no doubt about the meaning of the scriptures and in particular of the prophecy of Isaiah. It is the first thing he mentions. For Him and for the early church the recollection of the preaching of John the Baptist coincided with the intervention of God fulfilling the

prophecy. Eusebius of Caesarea writes in his commentary on Isaiah. "And indeed this was fulfilled historically and to the letter when John the Baptist proclaimed the saving manifestation of God in the wildness of the Jordan where in fact God's salvation was made visible."

We need to adopt an attitude of readiness to prepare for the coming of the Saviour. Perhaps too we need to listen to the booming voice of John the Baptist calling us to repent. The degree of confusion and greed among nations shows no sign of abating. It is inevitable that we sometimes feel lost and uncertain. We need St. Peter's reminder today to be patient, to wait for the Lord. God's initiative is certain: that is where the joyful proclamation of the coming of Jesus applies. We need to believe it. Then we can go on our way truly consoled by the conviction that the Lord will indeed come into our lives to fill the areas that we open to Him.

## **2 Advent B**

The love of God for us is a great mystery which in a sense all of us have to explore for ourselves. We are all influenced, of course, by the way other people think about God, but unless we try to discover what the Lord means to ourselves we will never get very far.

I can share with you some thoughts of my own on how I understand my faith and the presence of God in my life but this will not necessarily be the way you see things. For one thing circumstances differ so much from individual to individual that we cannot possibly all see things from same angle.

During Advent we are meant to ask ourselves what does it mean to talk about God becoming incarnate on this earth, in other words that the God who we think of as a creator, as spiritual and mysterious, could manifest himself in Jesus Christ of Nazareth.

The word of God in the scriptures on which we are now meditating gives us some starting points and provides material to guide the direction of our thoughts. This is all part of preparing the way for the Lord's coming. When we talk about his coming into our lives, this is not just a figure of speech; it is not like the nativity play put on by the children who merely pretend that it is happening. God's promise of salvation is something completely different from make believe: it is not the same as a scientific formula, which may be perfectly true but does not touch our lives. The Lord comes to do



something for us, he comes with a purpose. That purpose has been outlined for us in a great passage from Deutero-Isaiah, which makes up the first reading.

“The spirit of the Lord has been given to me

For the Lord has anointed me.

He has sent me to bring good news to the poor,

To bind up hearts that are broken;

To proclaim liberty to captives;

Freedom to those in prison

To proclaim a year of favour from the Lord." **Is. 61 11**

Here we have a very clear echo of the four servant songs which precede this passage in the course of the book. How the servant is described as being 'anointed' in Christ. Jesus applied these words to himself in St. Luke's Gospel. Ch.4 15-19.

The spirit always comes to mark a great work of God. The spirit had already been promised to the messianic king (Is 11 1-2.) and later to the messianic people. An anointing signifies an inner strengthening to preach God's word and it also enlightens the mind. Now at last the time of the promised salvation has arrived and the message is directed to the poor and the afflicted who make up a religious minority. The liberation which the Lord's power will effectively bring about will cause the people of God to break out in songs of gladness. 'They are clothed in the garments of salvation, i.e. the saving act of the Lord.

The Lord comes to bring good news to the poor and to us, to bind up hearts that are broken and to offer comfort and consolation to people who are going through a rough patch. This is one good reason why we should rejoice in the Lord and make this truly a "Gaudete" Sunday.

The advent witness of St. John the Baptist is again adduced in today's gospel, this time from St. John the Evangelist. One of the great themes of the fourth gospel is this work of witnessing to the truth and the light which is Christ. This kind of witness will be instrumental in leading people to faith.

The evangelist repeats the message of Mark – last Sunday’s gospel, namely that the Baptist is the Isaiah voice in the wilderness preparing the way for the Lord.

John the Baptist called out to those around him, “Among you there stands one whom you do not know”. Now this may not be true of us, but isn’t it a fact that we could all profitably know the Lord a little better. We take part in the Eucharist in order to meet Christ and through this encounter we get to know Him better. We also make up a community of believers whose vocation is like that of John the Baptist to be witnesses to the light. We do in fact witness to Christ the light of the world by going along publicly to join our parish community for the celebration of the Eucharist. But we can witness to Him in other ways as well. We can witness to Him by our serene faith in all circumstances even when buffeted by disappointment and temptation. We can witness to Him in our place of work by the way in which we carry out the tasks entrusted to us or which we have undertaken to do. We can witness to him amid the bright lights, the noise and the laughter of the Christmas party simply by communicating to others if the opportunity arises that Christ means something special to us. We can allow the Lord more room in our lives if we are open to Him while celebrating the Eucharist, the new covenant in his blood.

#### **4 Advent B**

We have noticed how all during Advent the theme of the future Messiah is underscored in the liturgy. This is a marvellous rich biblical idea because in the Messiah all God’s plans of salvation are concentrated. The messianic hope was focused on the seed of the Greek King David. It is beautifully treated in the great book of Isaiah with which we are familiar through the advent readings.

Today, however, for the fourth Sunday of Advent in the second year we turn to an unlikely source – the second book of Samuel. Here, however, we find a great messianic passage known as the Oracle. In this passage we see the importance of the Davidic Covenant and the significance of God’s temple at Jerusalem. In this part of an historical book the importance of the Davidic line is outlined for the future. We find a play on the word ‘house’, David is not destined to build a house (dwelling place) for the Lord, but instead God will establish a house (dynasty) for David. God’s call to David is described with special emphasis on his gracious acts of deliverance.

“The Lord will make you great: The Lord will make you a House. Your House and your sovereignty will always stand secure before me and your throne be established forever.” This is the promise that is repeated by the angel Gabriel to Mary as we read in St. Luke’s Gospel. St. Paul is reviewing the wisdom of God when he writes in his letter to the Romans what we have in today’s second reading. He refers to Jesus Christ who is “ the revelation of a mystery kept secret for endless ages, but now so clear that it must be broadcast to pagans everywhere to bring them to the obedience of faith. This is only what scripture has predicted, and it is all part of the way the eternal God wants things to be” (Rom. 16.26)

God’s ways are indeed marvellous and we can only ponder on them like Mary and praise his great wisdom seen in his guiding of the world’s destinies. It is the light of the fulfilment of prophecy that St. Luke sits down to write his account of the Gospel. Luke is a sensitive artist and storyteller and he brings the whole scene vividly before our eyes. For St. Luke Mary is a quiet humble person resident in a town called Nazareth in the province of Galilee. He tells us explicitly that she was a virgin. God sends a messenger to her who greets her in an unusual way saying that she is graced or favoured by the presence of the Lord. Mary finds the greeting disturbing because of her humility but the angel calmed her fears. He tells her that she will give birth to a son who will be ‘great’ and will be called the ‘Son of the Most High’. Mary is then told of God’s great intention namely to bestow the throne and sovereignty of the great King David on her child. These words must have overwhelmed the heart of Mary for she would have recognised in them the fulfilment of all the hopes of her people. The time of waiting and expectation had come to an end, the day of salvation was about to dawn. Mary would have recognised the fulfilment of all the messianic prophecies in the book of Isaiah and she would have noticed how the angel’s words matched the text of the oracle in 2 Samuel Ch. 7.

Mary’s answer is full of mild surprise. It has all the innocence of Eve in the Garden before the fall. “How will this be, since I do not know a man.” The angel tells her that this imminent conception will be the direct result of the coming of the Holy Spirit and his overshadowing of her. Because of this the child to be born of her will be called ‘holy’ and will be the Son of God. Her attention is drawn by the

angel to her elderly cousin Elizabeth who is pregnant. Just as it is apparently impossible for an elderly woman to become pregnant, so it appears impossible for a virgin to be pregnant but 'nothing' is impossible to God! Mary's response to the angelic messenger is magnificent, " I am the slave of the Lord, let it be done to me according to your word."

## **1 Advent C**

The first reading for the first Sunday of Advent of year three holds out before us yet again God's promise of a future messiah or saviour. The passage comes from the prophecy of Jeremiah.

"See the days are coming, - it is the Lord who speaks – when I am going to fulfil the promise I made to the House of Israel and the House of Judah. In those days and at that time I will make a virtuous Branch grow for David, who shall practice honesty and integrity in the Lord."

God's people expected someone to come and teach them how to live. He would save them from their enemies and from the evils that threatened them. The attitude of the rightly motivated man is well expressed in the responsorial psalm today:

"Lord, make me know your ways.

Lord, teach me your paths.

Make me walk in your truth and teach me:

For you are God my saviour." (Ps. 24)

Christ came once in answer to his people's expectation but he will come again at the end of the world. Advent never tires of repeating this crucial Christian doctrine to us.

St. Bernard in one of his sermons voices this Christian conviction "But you must not think of his first coming only, when he came to seek and save what was lost, but remember that he will come again and take us to himself. It is my desire that you should be constantly meditating on this twofold

Advent, continually turning over in your minds all that he has done for us in the first, and all that he promises to do in the second.”

Our present lives then are poised between these two great realities, or two comings of Christ. Christ came historically to effect the work of our salvation. Our lives are meant to be lived in the radiance of that first salvific coming. Our hopes are pinned on the future when he will come again to take us to himself. But Jesus does not remain in the past he does not remain absent from our earthly pilgrimage. Since the Incarnation he walks with us on the way if we cultivate his companionship in prayer. Advent is a time of waiting and prayer.

St. Paul gives this timely advice in the second reading for today taken from his first letter to the Thessalonians.

“And may he confirm your hearts in holiness that you may be blameless in the sight of our God and Father when our Lord Jesus Christ comes with all his Saints.”(1 Thes. 3.12)

St. Paul goes on to urge the Christians of Thessalonika to “make more and more progress in the kind of life you are meant to live.” All St. Teresa’s writings are, we might say an effort to interest us in making this kind of spiritual progress. For instance in her book known as the ‘Interior Castle’ she describes this progress from the outer courts of the castle through a series of inner spheres until we reach the place where God dwells. We are meant to meditate on what God has done for us. We have already noted St. Bernard’s exhortation to be ‘constantly turning over in our minds’ these great works of God. Prayer and meditation puts us in touch with Christ, for St. Teresa these are the doors of the Castle. Through prayer we begin to breathe in the atmosphere of the spiritual world. The material for our meditation ought to be the mysteries of the Christian faith as they are given expression in the Gospel.

Here in today’s Gospel the scene depicted is that of the second coming. In the Gospel Jesus talks about the End-time and he does so in the language and concepts native to him, that is the Jewish idea of the ‘age to come’. The Jews history is divided into two parts – the ‘Present Age’ and

the 'Age to come'. We find here the idea of future appearance or parousia of the Son of Man. This is intimately linked also to the coming of the kingdom. This apocalyptic passage in Luke's Gospel contains all the usual imagery of that genre of writing. The Son of Man will come in a cloud with power and great glory. The Old Testament passage that has most relevance here is Dan Ch. 7.13. "And I saw, coming on the clouds of Heaven one like a Son of Man." Jesus outlines certain ominous signs of great turmoil, which precede the End. But the passage of Luke is more general in its descriptions than Matthew and Mark. Jesus does not say when the parousia will take place. In Luke's Gospel all these things are hopeful signs, 'hold your hands high, because your redemption (apolutrosis) is near at hand. (This word 'redemption' means the liberation or releasing of a slave but does not usually contain the idea of payment). Jesus goes on to insist on the need for vigilance and wakefulness in the event of his sudden appearance. Very significantly he tells us to be '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'. (Luke 21-36).

## **2 Advent C**

As the season of Advent continues into this second week, the Church continues to nourish her people on the one unique hope of salvation that is centred on God. The first reading for today is a beautiful poem of restoration from the prophet Baruch. It contains many echoes of the other Advent prophecies from Isaiah in earlier years of the cycle. Jerusalem is bidden to lay aside her mourning robes and instead she will be decked out like a princess in preparation for her return to her own country. As we had in the book of Isaiah so here the mountains and hills will be levelled and the valleys filled in to facilitate Israel's triumphal progress. The people return joyfully with a song on their lips as the Psalm says (Ps. 125).

The Christian gospel means salvation, liberation, restoration and that is why St. Paul exults with joy as he greets the Philippians. The good work has been begun by God and if He initiated it, then He will surely complete it also. This working of God's grace in us leads up to when the "Day of Christ Jesus comes." This "day of Christ Jesus" is the day of judgement, which in the Old Testament

was known as the “Day of the Lord.” (Amos 5.20) Paul prays earnestly that the gift of love in the hearts of his disciples may continue to grow. This is the love “poured out in our hearts through the Holy Spirit.” (Rom. 5). Paul is the chief shepherd of the flock at Philippi and he shows at the beginning of the letter to them all the tenderness and love of a father. “God knows how much I miss you all, loving you as much as Christ Jesus loves you.” He is only interested in their spiritual progress and welfare. Paul has described what he means by Christian love (agape) in the 13<sup>th</sup> chapter of his letter to the Corinthians. This is the love that will produce the “fount of righteousness” in their hearts.

“Righteousness” is a right relationship with God which is inevitably fruitful. If Advent is a time of regeneration then the same growth in holiness ought to be evident in us. We too inherit the promise of salvation and we are the recipients of that gift of God.

St. John of the Cross, pictures spiritual progress as a journey along the way of union with God. Not alone but at the beginning it is a journey in the darkness of night until we progress and eventually reach the dawn. To undertake this journey we must be inspired, as St. Paul indicated, by love for God alone. St. John of the Cross wants to lead us along the road of prayer so as to eventually encounter God. To do this we must go by the way of repentance. St. Luke in today’s gospel shows how this is the way we prepare for the coming of Christ into our lives. John the Baptist, the prophet of repentance, prepared people for the saving and sanctifying ministry of Jesus. In order to advance in prayer we need to renounce our sinful desires and is ordered habits of life. We need to say “no” to ourselves like the person who resolves to give up smoking. In one of his sermons for Advent St. Bernard had this very appropriate thought for his monks.

“It is not necessary for you to cross the seas, nor to pierce the clouds, nor to climb mountains to meet your God. It is not a lengthy road that is set before you: you have only to enter into yourself to find him. For his word is very near to you; it is on your lips and in your hearts. Encounter him in compunction of heart and in confession of your sins.

St. Luke in the gospel for today thus tries to prepare people for the ministry of Jesus. The New Testament writers were unanimous that John The Baptist was the ‘voice’ crying in the wilderness as the great prophecy of Deutero-Isaiah foretold in the opening section of his work.

Ch. 40.

### **3 Advent C**

The liturgy of the word for this third Sunday of Advent in year three opens with a psalm of joy from the prophet Zephaniah. Zephaniah is one of the minor prophets and like his counter part Amos he preached judgement the “way of the Lord”. The opening passage is the only lighter note in his book which makes some scholars suggest that it is an addition. In this passage, however, the theme is one of joyful expectation which makes it a very appropriate passage for Advent.

The psalm (by way of exception from Isaiah) continues the theme of joy and this it taken up again in the second reading from the New Testament. It is a passage from St. Paul’s letter to the Philippians CH 4.4-7 and begins with the words ‘Gaudete’ – rejoice. This is the traditional reading that gave its name to this day ‘Gaudete Sunday’. The penitential purple may be replaced by rose-coloured vestments to signify joy and to afford some relief from the severer side of Advent. After this call for joy the key words follow, ‘The Lord (risen Lord) is near.’ We cannot miss the exultant note, the imminence of the Lord’s coming.

The gospel today however recalls Christians to their duty. John the Baptist gives directions on the need for sharing food and clothing with the poor. He also had advice for other classes such as the tax collectors and military people. The latter were given the rather unfashionable advice, ‘Be content with your pay.’

St. Luke in the extract from his gospel (Ch. 33vv. 10-18) gives us an idea of the general atmosphere of the time. There was an air of expectation which centred around the striking figure of the Baptist. People had been led by the prophetic writings to expect a Messiah or a saviour. They were correct in their timing of course but wrong in the figure in whom they reposed their hopes. John is only the precursor, the forerunner of the Messiah. As such John was self-effacing and left no one in doubt



about his won role; he pointed ahead to someone more powerful. "...he will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and with fire." John's message is severe in the extreme. It concerns the strict judgement that God will pronounce on his people. The message of Jesus Himself when he eventually He Himself proclaims the gospel is no less threatening to those who choose to ignore it. St. Matthew relates that Jesus told a parable about the darnel very similar to the image John the Baptist uses in the gospel today. John tells us that the Messiah will discriminate between the wheat and the chaff using the winnowing fan or equipment for harvesting. 'The chaff he will burn in a fire that will never go out. This is how Jesus Himself describes the treatment the darnel will receive. " Well then, just as the darnel is gathered up and burnt in the fire so it will be at the end of time. The Son of Man will send his angels and they will gather out of His Kingdom all things that provoke offences and all who do evil, and throw them into the blazing furnace, where there will be weeping and grinding of teeth." (Mt 13.40).

This theme of divine judgement does not get sufficient attention in our soft times. Perhaps the Church ought to dwell more on what is so inescapably a part of revelation. Other Christian denominations have a strong tradition of reflecting on this theme. We need not take the rather terrifying position of John Calvin but perhaps we could do well to remember his words, "For first his indignation is like a raging fire, but whose touch all things are devoured and annihilated. Next all creatures are the instruments of his judgement, so that those to whom the Lord will thus publicly manifest his anger will feel that heaven and earth, and sea and all beings, animate and inanimate, are, as it were, inflamed with dire indignation against them, and armed for their destruction." (John Clavin, of the Christian Religion Bk III 12).

This is certainly the tradition of Christian faith however we understand it. We may recall the words of the ancient sequence, the 'Dies Irae'.

'Then shall written book be brought showing every deed and thought: from which judgement will be sought'.

#### **4 Advent C**

For this fourth and last Sunday of Advent in the third year of the cycle, the liturgy uses a messianic passage from another of the minor prophets this time . The evangelist will see in this passage a prophetic pointer to the birthplace of Jesus the Messiah.

“The Lord says this. You, (Bethlehem) Ephratha the least of the clans of Judah, out of you will be born for me the one who is to rule over Israel.”

The second reading for today is taken from the letter to the Hebrews and this is a deeply theological passage drawing out as it does the ultimate significance of the incarnation, namely that Jesus gave His life in atonement for our sins.

“This is what Christ said on coming into the world.”

In this opening line we have the profound idea of the incarnation of the word in terms of Johannine theology “and he was coming into the world (Jn. Ch,1 v.9). The passage and Hebrews then goes on to quote Ps. 40 from the Septuagint version, “you who wanted no sacrifice or oblation, prepared a body for me. You took no pleasure in holocausts or sacrifices for sin then I said, just as I was commanded in the scroll of the book, ‘God here I am! I am coming to obey your will.’”

The author here is pointing to the ineffectiveness of the sacrifices of the Old Law to take away sin. In their place God accepted the perfect sacrifice of Jesus who carried out the father’s will and gave himself willingly for us. God’s will included our sanctification by means of the ‘offering of His body made once and for all by Jesus Christ’. The Church does well to remind us today of the real purpose of the incarnation – to bring us the gift of redemption. It is perhaps easy at Christmas to be detained by story of the birth of Christ beautiful as it is: Jesus did not remain an infant but His life unfolded inexorably ending in the suffering and humiliation of the Cross.

The writer of Hebrews pictures the pre-incarnate son in a heavenly dialogue with the Father outlining the reason for the incarnation.

In the gospel today Luke recalls the visitation by Mary of her cousin Elizabeth. There is some similarity between the liturgy today and the Feast of the Annunciation of March 25<sup>th</sup>. The same passage that we have looked at in Hebrews is employed and the responsorial psalm is the one which

is under consideration, 'Here I am O Lord to do your will.' In this section of Luke's gospel we are dealing, of course, with the joyful mysteries of the life of Christ – the annunciation and the visitation.

The story of Mary'

S journey to the hill country is beautifully told. This visit is given as Mary's reaction to the heavenly visitation of which she had recently been the object. Under the influence of the Holy Spirit Elizabeth was prompted to return Mary's greeting with the words, "Blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb." "Benedicta tu in mulieribus et benedictus fructus ventris tui." These are the hollowed word of the Hail Mary which has been repeated more often than any others in the history of the Church with the exception of the 'Our Father'. Mary is more blessed than all her famous predecessors in the Old Testament, Judith or Ruth or Deborah. St. Ambrose has a lovely passage on this scene in his commentary on St. Luke's Gospel.

"You also are blessed, you also have both heard and believed: for a soul that believes conceives and brings forth the Word of God and acknowledges His works. May the soul of Mary be in each one of you as that you may magnify the Lord: may the spirit of Mary be in each one of you, so that you may rejoice in God."

We can do no better than prepare for the coming of the Saviour in the company of the Virgin Mater. She was nearest to the Messiah in the physical order of things in bearing Him for nine months in her womb and bringing him forth for the salvation of the world.

### **Christmas Night**

Now at last Christmas is with us. The four weeks of waiting and preparation that Characterise Advent have come to an end. During those weeks we have meditated on the figure of the messiah, especially as delineated in the writings of Isaiah. But the church has kept some of the riches of that great prophetic book in reserve: there are three more readings from Isaiah for the three masses of Christmas Day on which we have still to meditate.

"The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light. On those who live in a land of deep shadow a light has shone." (Is. 9.2q). The historical situation is which this passage was written

couldn't concern us here: we can do no better than the evangelist and apply it to the advent of Jesus. But that is more important we associate it with His coming into our hearts tonight and lighting up a dark world. Nothing else can afford to the spirit of many greater joy: the prison gates have been thrown Open and we are free people.

“For there is a child born for us.” ‘Puer natus est nobis’ this is the promised Emmanuel, God with us come to set us free. As we know, a name was deeply symbolic in Israel but this son who is giving to us has not only one name but also a whole litany of names full of meaning and significance. He is called Wonder-Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father (Avi-Od) and Prince of Peace (Sher-Shalom).

The coming of the Prince of Peace is indeed a reason for singing a new song and carolling to the newborn king. If we may slightly alter the opening words of the second reading tonight it is an ‘Epiphany of God’s grace’ (Mt. 2.11).

This child is the bearer of salvation for the whole world. But we cannot lay hold of this gift on a personal community level unless we accept its implications. Those implications concern the way in which we behave. The Lord’s coming has very much of an ethical connotation for the Christian. We are not to forget the motivation given us at the beginning of Advent by our Christian conduct. We hold ourselves in readiness for the ‘parousia’ of our great God and Saviour Christ Jesus. (2.13)

The gospel for Midnight Mass is also for ‘Mass at Dawn’ is taken from St. Luke. Luke is precise in his account. He sets the scene in its historical context under Caesar Augustus. The latter had ordered a census and so Joseph set off on the long journey from the province of Galilee to Judaea with Mary his wife. This was because he was descended from the House of David and Bethlehem was the town of David. This is a very significant detail in view of the fact that Jesus would be promised Messiah. In the providence of God this coincided with the birth of the Messiah.”: While they were there the time came for her to have her child, and she gave birth to a son, her first-born” (Luke 2.7) Luke tells us that ‘simple poor shepherds’ were the first category of people to learn of the good news. The book of Daniel mentions Gabriel and Michael as messengers of Yahweh. Now Luke

tells us that a messenger (Malach) of the Lord proclaims God's word. This is a personal manifestation of God and the evangelist tells us it was surrounded by the 'dosea' or cabod' of the Lord that is His glory. The Gospel is proclaimed: for the first time and it is a wholly reassuring message.

“Do not be afraid, look, I bring you news of great joy, a joy to be shared by the whole people. Today is the town of David a saviour has been born for you: he is Christ the Lord.” – Christos Kurios – The Messiah Lord – the shepherds are given a sign a baby wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger. Then like an orchestra or chorus, a group of heavenly 'Sabbath' takes up the note, “Gloria in Excelsis” and peace to men who are the objects of God's favour. What is indicated here is the Hebrew 'Shalom' as the fullness of peace and security and well being.

### **Christmas Dawn Mass**

What a marvellous dawn it is for us on this Christmas morning equalled only by the splendour of the Easter Mass.

Salvation has dawned for God's people with the coming of his Son. Again we exult with the prophet Isaiah that Advent is over and we now contemplate with joy what it promised. “Your saviour comes” (1<sup>st</sup> reading) and everything is changed. We are now living in the era of the new creation and so appropriate new names are introduced – ‘the holy people’, ‘the Lord's redeemed’, and ‘the sought-after’: Jerusalem indeed is the

The presence with us of ‘God our saviour’ our Emmanuel is beautifully described in the extract from St. Paul's letter to Titus. We might paraphrase it by saying that it is an epiphany of the love and kindness of God. This comes to us by way of a free gift, a gift that infinitely surpasses anything we can receive from mere humans. The scintillating array of Christmas boxes that those who love one another exchange at this time is a very pale reflection indeed of this supreme gift of God. This gift is none other than the incarnate Son of God. He is presented to us by Mary His mother gift-wrapped in white swaddling bands. In the words of that beautiful Christian song ‘O Holy Night’.

“A thrill of hope a weary world rejoices  
for yonder breaks a new and glorious dawn.”

The incarnation represents the climax of all God's interventions in favour of his people. Our misery and need had aroused the compassion of our loving father. St. Paul will never tire of proclaiming this completely undeserved aspect of what God has done (cf. Rom. 3.21 Eph. 2.1-10). Our need is great; our bondage is just as hopeless as that which held the chosen people to the backbreaking labour of Egypt. In the appearance of this newborn child, in his face the light of hope begins to shine. Well indeed may we join in the well-loved carols?

“How silently, how silently  
The wondrous gift is given  
As God imparts to human hearts  
The blessings of his heaven.  
No ear may hear his coming  
But in this world of sin  
Where weak souls will receive him still  
The dear Christ enters in.”

As we saw in the gospel of Midnight Mass, a poor and lowly category of people, namely shepherds, were the first to learn about redemption's happy dawn! Consequently they became the first to evangelise the world with the message of salvation. It is perhaps no coincidence that the name 'Shepherd of the flock' became the most popular way of referring to the function of leadership in the Church. And today more than ever we still refer to our 'pastors' and the pastoral ministry.

This lowly group vigilant and 'watching in prayer' now go on a pilgrimage to the stable of Bethlehem. The shepherds had learned the good news by a revelation from God, Luke tells us, that now they engage in a dialogue with one another over these mysterious events. When they arrived in Bethlehem they set about to find a baby in a manger. Their search was rewarded and eventually they found the child with Joseph and Mary his mother. These shepherds may have been looked down on by the wealthier inhabitants of the towns and villages but they were now the ones who found themselves spiritually rich. They were now the ones who found themselves spiritually rich. They were

conscious that their father Abraham had like them kept watch over his flocks. They knew that David, the ideal king of their race, had been chosen by God when only a shepherd boy. So the shepherds now returned to their own flocks praising and thanking the God of Israel who did such marvellous things before their eyes.

As long as time lasts the Church will continue to proclaim to the world the Message of peace and goodwill that radiates from the lowly manger. In a world torn by conflict the recurring celebration of the birth of Christ year after year heralds a new hope. In the newborn face of an infant we discover again the mystery of life and we solve again the enigma of existence.

### **Mass of Christmas Day**

For the third and final Mass of Christmas the Mass during the day, the Church seems to reserve for us her profoundest reflections. In the magnificent prologues to the New Testament books of Hebrews and John, we are brought into the presence of awe-inspiring mysteries: the eternal birth of the Son of God in the bosom of the Father is proclaimed to us. Lovely indeed are the feel of the evangelists who have preached the gospel to the world. That great passage from Isaiah, which rendered in song as 'Our God Reigns' we have all grown to love with Pope John Paul, fittingly introduces this deep theology of the incarnation. We are by now very familiar with the prophecy of Isaiah through our Advent meditations. Today above all we may savour the passage from the Book of Consolation. How today the new or second exodus is proclaimed by second Isaiah (Ezek). The Lord accomplishes this with outstretched arm' or in the words of Isaiah 'he bares his holy arm'.

The second reading from the Letter to the Hebrews today thoroughly prepares the ground for the prologue to the fourth Gospel. God has now 'spoken to us through his son'. This new revelation of God on Christmas Day surpasses all others as much as Christ surpasses the angels.

First of all we notice that the Father has 'appointed' the son to inherit everything. The created order (including all peoples) is by right the heritage of the son. Hebrews here uses the word 'ainos' rather than 'cosmos' to signify the extent of the son's dominion. Secondly the son is the 'radiant light of

God's glory'. The sun throws out its brilliant beams that light up the whole of our solar system. The image here is the same as that used about wisdom reflecting God's glory (Wisdom Ch.7.26).

In the next place we read that the son is the 'perfect copy' of God's nature. This is the same thing as the impression made by a seal on the appropriate material.

The sacred writer now refers to the son's role in the universe sustaining it by his powerful word. Christ is the centre of the continual stability. This reminds us immediately of the creation account in Genesis and the gospel of today's Mass. Finally the Son has taken away sin and is now enthroned 'at the right hand of divine Majesty'. Here we have an echo of the enthronement Psalm No. 110.

All this leads us to the proclamation of the Gospel for the Mass of Christmas Day. The Nicene Creed has taken its description of the incarnation from this Gospel and the liturgy bids us kneel when we sing today – 'et verbum caro factum est.'

In presenting us with the prologue to the 4<sup>th</sup> gospel the Church is asking us to meditate more deeply on the significance of the child in the manger. The picture Luke gives us points to God's self-communication in his word that the present gospel brings out for us.

Now we think of the pre-existing son, as in the first reading from Hebrews. He is the personified wisdom of the Father (cf. Prov. 8.22). This 'child who has been born to us, this son who has been given to us' is truly our Emmanuel. 'The word was God'. John will tell us very shortly that the 'word' was in fact the child who was born of Mary, in Bethlehem, Jesus Christ. But Jesus was not born out of human stock, or urge of the flesh or out of man, but of God himself.' This 'word' became flesh and lived among us.' This 'word' as John will afterward insist on elsewhere in his gospel is the life and light of the world. John the Baptist witnessed to this light that shone for all who had eyes to see. Many however preferred to remain in darkness. They would never know the peace and joy of Christmas.

### **THE HOLY FAMILY**

Christmas Day has come and gone for another year. For a brief period we have caught again the magic of the first Christmas that brought the newborn saviour into our world. There is something



unique about Christmas: people for a while seem to overcome and forget the barriers that normally divide them. We can sense the atmosphere if we walk into a hospital or even the most hidebound institution on Christmas Day. Remoteness and isolation tend to diminish and there is an effort on the part of everyone to enter into the spirit of the season. At this time more than at any other we might say that the world appears to make up one very large family.

Today on the Sunday after Christmas the Church appropriately focuses our attention not on Jesus the infant saviour but also on His mother Mary and Joseph his foster father. We keep the feast of these three who constitute the ideal for the Christian family. The Church instituted this feast in 1921 so that our homes may in some way reflect the values and the relationships found among the members of the Holy Family.

Already in the Old Law the chosen people were aware of the challenges and demands of family relationships. These are often emphasised in the sacred writings. Indeed the duty of a child towards his parents was enshrined in a solemn injunction of the Decalogue - "Honour your father and Mother," (20.12) the first reading from the book of Sirach today elaborates on this sacred precept.

Christmas is a time when God's great concern for us is brought home by the fact that His son became one of ourselves, a child in his mother's arms. Now we can see more clearly than ever the immense dignity of life, of parenthood, childhood, friendship and love. All these values are concentrated in the family and grow from there. We learn how the Father looks on all of us as his children. His sons and daughters. Together we make up one human family sharing life with all of its wonder, its rewards, its tensions and its sacrifices.

In the second reading St. Paul outlines for us the ethical exigencies of Christian life that derive from the incarnation of the word. Chapter 1 of Colossians describes the Son of God in terms not inferior to those of the prologue to the fourth gospel. Now he spells out for us the practical consequences of that doctrine.

"Bear with one another. Forgive each other as soon as a quarrel begins: the Lord has forgiven you". Today more than ever, healing and reconciliation are needed in our society and in our

families. Disagreement and resentment are quick to rear an ugly head. There are always individual, family and group disturbances that need restoration and wholeness, serious breakdown in family life ending in divorce, and heartache are endemic in our society. Only a strong conviction and God is indeed 'with us' can bring peace, restore dignity and inspire confidence in those involved in such situations.

The Gospel of Matthew chosen for today vividly show us that life for the holy family did not always stay in the peaceful way it is depicted on a Christmas card. Now we see how they were subjected to the pressures of circumstances – danger from a tyrannical ruler. The entailed uprooting, travel and the difficulties associated with becoming refugees and displaced person. But these difficulties were overcome by the profound unity and peace that reigned in that family group.

The Gospels for Years B and C vary on the feast of the Holy Family. Otherwise the liturgy of the word remains the same.

The gospel passages selected for these three years of the cycle are taken from St. Luke and as these are continuous reading we may meditate on them together –taken as a whole.

St. Luke in this gospel passage (Ch.2.22-40) shows us Mary and Joseph intent on carrying out their responsibilities as parents in complying with the prescriptions of the Law. In the gospel incident as portrayed for us Mary and Joseph are like any two proud parents lavishing care on their child. The development of the child followed the normal laws of growth and maturation because the word had indeed become flesh, truly man. The continuation of St. Luke's gospel from Ch.2.v41 for year three sets before us the mysterious episode of the finding of the Child Jesus in the temple – a joyful event indeed for Mary and Joseph

As we celebrate today the feast of the Holy Family we see how real, how human were the situations in which they lived. The Christian family demands mutual respect among its members if it is to survive. Parents must at all costs insist on respect from their children. If they do not remain firm on this point there follows not only an erosion of values within the family but also in human society as well. If children are allowed to grow up without having to show any respect for their parents then it is highly

unlikely that they will respect other people. Indeed, the likely outcome is completely unacceptable or even violent, resulting in the kind of thing with which we are all too familiar today.

St. Luke shows us that Mary uttered the gently and puzzled reproach to her son, "My child, why have you done this to us?" See how worried your father and I have been, looking for you. In her own way, because she could not understand, she was concerned that the respect due to her as a mother had been withheld. The word of God tells us that even when Jesus 'explained' they still did not understand. But the boy Jesus did indeed return with them and 'lived under their authority.' St. Luke tells us that he continued to behave in every way and it was on these mysterious things that Mary pondered unceasingly thus becoming the model for that prayerful meditation always on the word of God.

### **MARY, MOTHER OF GOD – JANUARY 1**

Today as we begin a new year the Church celebrates the solemnity of Mary the Mother of God. This was formerly known as the Feast of the Circumcision of the Lord and of the conferring on him the name 'Jesus'. In either case we are still celebrating Christmas under another aspect – the coming into the world whose very name means 'Saviour'.

The great significance accorded to the name of a person or thing by the Jews is underlined in the choice of reading from the Old Testament. The passage chosen is the beautiful one from the Book of Numbers. It is a priestly blessing invoking the great name of Yahweh three times in blessing.

From earliest times Mary has been honoured as the Mother of God, 'Theotokos' or 'God-bearer'. This title arose during the theological disputes with Nestorius in the fourth century. Nestorius objected to the title and so was indirectly denying that the word or logos had become flesh in the man Jesus. Mary was proclaimed the Mother of God at the Council of Ephesus in 431.

St. Paul in the passage read from his letter to the Galatians sums up the Christian tradition:

"When the appointed time came, God sent His Son, born of a woman (i.e. of Mary), born a subject of the Law to redeem those who were subjects of the Law and to enable us to be adopted as sons." (Gal.)

The gospel for today's feast is almost identical with that of the Mass at Dawn on Christmas Day. The only difference is that it begins at one verse later and ends with an additional verse (Luke. Ch1v21), "When the eighth day came and the Child was to be circumcised, they gave him the name Jesus, the name the angel had given him before his conception." The Church is very conscious of the key role Mary played in the plan of our salvation. The opening prayer of the Mass commends Christians to the intercession of Mary.

"God our Father, May we always have the prayers of the Virgin Mother Mary, for you bring us life and salvation through Jesus Christ her Son."

The Virgin Mother of God does not get great 'coverage' in the scriptures. Paul only alludes to her (born of a woman), and Luke is restrained in his references to her. He is content to draw attention to the bare facts of her involvement in God's plan. But as we look back over centuries of Christian tradition, we see how God has 'exalted the lowly'. Each member of the church can now take refuge in the powerful intercession of Mary. She is at the centre of the mystery of the incarnation and from it all her influence stems. She pondered long and deeply on God's relationship with his people as revealed in the covenant. She could only marvel at the role that she, the virgin, had been accorded. All the great messianic prophecies had now come gloriously to life in her. But Mary's keen spiritual intuition would have enabled her to see that this was no mere individual exaltation. She was chosen for a purpose – to transmit life through the Saviour to the people of the New Covenant. Because Mary is the Mother of God she is also Mother of the Church. Pope Paul VI proclaimed Mary to us under this title. Rightly then we pray in the venerable prayers of Christian tradition.

"Sub Tuum praesidium, confugimus, cancte Dei Genitrix."

Or in the even more ancient and well-loved Ave Maria,

"Sancta Maria, Mater Dei, ora pro nobis peccatoribus mane et in hora mortis nostrae".

## **Second Sunday after Christmas**

The message of Christmas amounts to this: the God for whom the world is continually searching, the God whom we cannot see, has been made visible and is present in Jesus the incarnate word. As the Christmas preface puts it so beautifully.

“In Him we see our God made visible and so are caught up in love of the God we cannot see.”

We have now had some time to contemplate the Christmas mystery and today perhaps we are meant to ask ourselves, ‘how have I benefited from this time of grace?’ On the second Sunday after Christmas the Church also suggests some second thoughts to us about this tremendous mystery. That is why the liturgy is not being merely repetitive when it asks us again to listen to the prologue of St. John’s Gospel that we heard in the Mass of Christmas Day.

The incarnation is so stupendous a mystery that we need to be exposed to its power more than once. In our day one of the values that has been threatened most is the dignity of the individual. In this resides our sense of identity and worth. This irreplaceable value has suffered especially at the hand of various branches of the media. The result in many cases has been a glut of pornography and violence in our society. In regard to the first mentioned, the degradation of the human person blunts all sense of beauty and goodness in human life: in the case of the second, the emphasis on war and violence portrays the gift of life itself as cheap and expendable.

The Christian doctrine of the incarnation that we progress in the Creed (in response to the gospel) is the powerful and effective answer to these tendencies. The human body has a marvellous dignity, because not only God’s Son became man but also in doing this he has made us sons and daughters of God. “To all that did accept him he gave them power to become children of God.”

The word of God has taken on the lineaments of the human body and in doing so he has transformed everything. “The word was made flesh and lived among us”. The incarnation is such a staggering thought because it means that God and man must in Jesus. It is difficult even to begin to realise the implications of this for our lives. God has entered fully into human life in Jesus, identifying

Himself completely with us men and women. No one can maintain any more that God doesn't know or care about us.

The divine scriptures in the course of their growth gained some remarkable insights and anticipations of what might happen, in the first reading today from Sirach the wisdom of God is pictured as coming to dwell with his people. Indeed the very words that John himself eventually uses to describe the incarnation seemed borrowed from this passage: the word 'lived among us'.

"He said, pitch your tent in Jacob make Israel your inheritance". From eternity in the beginning he created me and for eternity I shall remain." (Sir.24) Contemplating God's wonderful plan St. Paul prays in the second reading:

May the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, give you a spirit of wisdom and perception of what is revealed to bring you to full knowledge of Him." (Eph. 1) As we ponder anew on what Christmas means we find there the possibilities of renewal and recovery. We know that mankind's threatened or lost dignity can be saved if we bring it to the living and life-giving word of God.

### **The Feast of the Epiphany**

The theme of Epiphany celebrated on January 6 is in direct continuity with that of Christmas. Indeed liturgically the Feast is even more ancient than Christmas itself and in some continental countries such as Spain it has retained its original status.

The first reading for this solemnity is a beautiful passage from Isaiah. The theme of this poem of Zion revolves round the restored community who are still awaiting salvation. The Lord is the chief speaker in this poem, and His promised saving act is repeated.

The prophet says that the holy city of Jerusalem is the one bright spot in a dark world. Because of this it attracts the nations to itself. In the Old Testament light symbolises the presence of the Lord, and also the gift of salvation itself. The nations bring back with them the Israelites who were scattered. The wealth of the nations is brought to Zion to the New Temple, the second temple of Zarubabel (151 BC). The nations come to pay tribute to the Lord and to worship him with sacrifice.

This is a very suitable backdrop for the light that issues from the Star of Bethlehem. Full and final redemption has dawned for God's people and we now bask in the radiance of that revelation.

St. Paul in the second reading from Ephesians writes:

"The mystery that has now been revealed through the spirit to his Holy Apostles and Prophets was unknown to any man in past generations; it means that pagan now share the same inheritance..."

St. Paul here captures the meaning of 'Epiphany'. Jesus is a revelation of God, fulfilling all His promises of salvation and moreover he is presented to the nations outside Israel. Here the universalism of Isaiah is brought out. Christ is manifested to the world. The concept of Epiphany was originally linked to the Feast of the Baptism of the Lord that was also seen as a manifestation of him. A third manifestation highlighted by this was the sign performed by Jesus at Cana where he 'manifested His glory'.

The Feast of the Epiphany is a glorious opportunity to revitalise our Christian faith. God has revealed himself fully to us in his Son. Each year as we celebrate this day we are reminded how that bright star shed its light upon us. Matthew in his gospel has brought all the Old Testament themes together. He rings his account to a climax when the three seekers from a foreign land come to the feet of the newborn King and fall to their knees in adoration. This scene has been one of the most popular subjects for Christian artists through the ages. Their total generosity urges us to look into the poverty of our own hearts, to try and find something to offer our King.

We pray in the Eucharist:

"Lord, accept the offerings of your Church, not gold, frankincense and myrrh, but the sacrifice and food they symbolise: Jesus Christ.... With Epiphany the sense of Christmas festivity seems to be coming to a close.

### **The Baptism of the Lord**

In the earliest tradition of the Church, especially in the East, the Lord's Baptism was celebrated at the same time as Epiphany. It was called the Feast of the 'Holy Lights' and during this time it was customary to confer the sacrament of baptism on children and on new converts. Baptism consequently was known as 'illumination' or 'enlightenment' and the new convert carried a lighted candle in procession. This ceremony is incorporated in the new rite of baptism.

Just over 1600 years ago St. Gregory Nazianzen, who was bishop somewhere near modern Istanbul, preached a series of sermons on the baptism of Christ around Epiphany time. Gregory explains that the reason why the oil light was introduced was to illustrate Christ's words:

'I am the light of the world' (John) He writes, "Jesus comes up out of the water and raises up the whole world within him. He sees the heavens rent open which Adam has barred for himself and posterity even as paradise was barred by the flaming sword, and the spirit coming to meet him, bearing witness to the godhead they both share."

The liturgy tells us whom this mysterious figure is who stands in line to be baptised by John. In the first reading from Isaiah we have the first of the famous 'servant songs'. The gospel of Matthew for year one echoes the language of the Isaiah son "This is my son, the beloved my favour rests on him." These words are very close indeed to those of Isaiah "My chosen one in whom my soul delights." (Son and Servant are two ancient titles for Jesus). 'Chosen one' is an alternative for 'beloved', and some people think that 'Son' was in the original Aramaic. In this gospel we are being told to turn to Jesus Christ and Listen to him - he is the gift of the Father to us.

The second reading today from the 'Acts' traces the ministry of Jesus back to this scene of his baptism when he was anointed 'with the Holy Spirit and with power'. This was the starting point for his ministry of reconciliation. By submitting to John's baptism Jesus has also made it easier for sinners to identify with him. Like the servant of Isaiah, Jesus brings forgiveness and peace.

The synoptic gospels all relate the account of the baptism of Jesus and they are read on successive years of the cycle. We see especially from Luke how the eminence of John the Baptist even overshadowed Jesus Himself in some people's minds. This led to a 'Baptist movement'. But



none of the evangelists would have missed out on telling us about the significance of this event. The reason was that it was also connected with the death of Jesus.

“I have a baptism with which I must be baptised.” (Mark 10). The Ministry of Jesus, his ‘going’ about doing good’ led Him straight to the Cross.

With the Baptism of the Lord the Christmas season closes. From now on we will follow the footsteps of the Lord in His ministry of inaugurating the Kingdom of God. After a few of the initial Sundays of the year it will be time to begin preparing for the high point of the life of Jesus – namely His journey to His passion and death, His return to the Father. The Sundays of Lent will focus our minds on these events that will culminate in the celebration of the paschal mystery.