

THE ADVENT OF OUR KING

ADVENT READINGS &
REFLECTIONS



November 29th, First Sunday of Advent

First Reading

*You, LORD, are our father,
our redeemer you are named forever.
Why do you let us wander, O LORD, from your ways,
and harden our hearts so that we fear you not?
Return for the sake of your servants,
the tribes of your heritage.
Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down,
with the mountains quaking before you,
while you wrought awesome deeds we could not hope for,
such as they had not heard of from of old.
No ear has ever heard, no eye ever seen, any God but you
doing such deeds for those who wait for him.
Would that you might meet us doing right,
that we were mindful of you in our ways!
Behold, you are angry, and we are sinful;
all of us have become like unclean people,
all our good deeds are like polluted rags;
we have all withered like leaves,
and our guilt carries us away like the wind.
There is none who calls upon your name,
who rouses himself to cling to you;
for you have hidden your face from us
and have delivered us up to our guilt.
Yet, O LORD, you are our father;
we are the clay and you the potter:
we are all the work of your hands. - Isaiah 63:16B-17, 19B; 64:2-7*

Second Reading

*Brothers and sisters:
Grace to you and peace from God our Father
and the Lord Jesus Christ.*

*I give thanks to my God always on your account
for the grace of God bestowed on you in Christ Jesus,
that in him you were enriched in every way,
with all discourse and all knowledge,
as the testimony to Christ was confirmed among you,
so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift
as you wait for the revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ.
He will keep you firm to the end,
irreproachable on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.*

*God is faithful,
and by him you were called to fellowship with his Son,
Jesus Christ our Lord. - 1 Corinthians 1:3-9*

The Gospel

*Jesus said to his disciples:
“Be watchful! Be alert!
You do not know when the time will come.
It is like a man traveling abroad.
He leaves home and places his servants in charge,
each with his own work,
and orders the gatekeeper to be on the watch.
Watch, therefore;
you do not know when the Lord of the house is coming,
whether in the evening, or at midnight,
or at cockcrow, or in the morning.
May he not come suddenly and find you sleeping.
What I say to you, I say to all: ‘Watch!’” - Mark 13:33-37*

The word for *watch* in the Greek of the New Testament, as in the Latin version (which is the basis for the readings in the lectionary) means “stay awake,” or more poetically, “keep vigil.” This meaning is clear enough in the translation we are using since “to be watchful” or “watch” is contrasted with sleeping, whatever time of day it may be.

In order to understand what it means and why it is spiritually important to stay awake, it is necessary to know what it means to be asleep. The ancients had a rather precise understanding: they understood sleep, as it were, from the top down; that is, extending from some condition of the soul and then influencing the body. In our more modern conception we tend to view sleep simply as a bodily condition, and do not emphasize the condition of the soul of the sleeper. That is why sleep and waking as metaphors tend to have a more spiritual sense in ancient teaching and documents than in more recent teachings. Contemporary spiritual psychology speaks more of “mindfulness” than of wakefulness or watchfulness.

In the classic understanding of human nature, sleep is understood as a state in which the soul’s internal sense, which collates and combines the various impressions of the external senses, ceases to function with regard to new impressions. This means that although the external senses can still operate, their information is not united into a unified whole in order to be known clearly. Thus the soul’s other internal senses, like imagination and memory, can take off and go in any direction at all with what has been previously known, even as the soul is very weak in receiving any outward impulses. We experience this in our dreams.

But the external senses are not offering us any reliable new information, since their perceptions are not being gathered into one by the internal sense that unites into coherent precepts the various things heard and seen and smelt and tasted and touched. Thus we do not remember what went on

around us while we were sleeping. To be wakeful or watchful is thus to be able to take in what goes on around us by the power of our soul that unites outer perception to inner.

A *spiritual state of wakefulness* or watchfulness is thus a state of integrity or continuity between the outer and the inner perception, and it flows from the inner perception as the more perfect and powerful. A person who is spiritually asleep is not using his inner powers of soul to bring together his outer experience. Thus, his knowledge and desires lack coherence and wholeness, and he may be caught unaware at any moment. He lacks a complete picture of what is going on around him.

What is the spiritual inner sense that is like our natural inner sense powers? Evidently it is the power of faith working through love: the knowledge of the Faith and the love of God and neighbor that unite and give order and meaning to all the many experiences we have of others and the outer world. In simple terms, it is our active faith and love toward Jesus the Savior, which is always looking for his coming.

In this holy season of Advent we are constantly being reminded to keep awake and ready for the coming of the Savior. If we are recollected within, preferring to dwell on the truths of faith and the love of God, then our outer experiences will be understood in the true light; we will know how to love and will not be bewildered by all the many things that life tosses our way.

The best way to maintain this inner wakefulness is, on the positive side, through the practice of prayer. This means having a preference for thinking about and longing for the wonderful things, the mysteries and promises revealed by our Savior, which we can see revealed in Sacred Scripture and the lives of the saints. A serious daily rosary would begin to bring this about. Another way would be some quiet adoration before the Blessed Sacrament. Let's commit daily to pondering within ourselves the mysteries of faith as a new Church year begins this Advent.

On the negative side, this inner wakefulness means shutting down the noise and distraction of the many media we use, which do not unify our inner gaze and longing for happiness but rather stir up our passions and trouble us, and ultimately make us sad and dissatisfied. So let's turn off those things for a good time each day, and set up a discipline that will enable us to turn our hearts inward. Only in this way can we wisely and reliably interpret all our numerous outer experiences, and be ready to notice the Lord's arrival among us.

The Savior tells us the book of Revelation, "Behold I stand at the door and knock, and if any man hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to him." In order to hear the knock and see the door, we must be awake. A loud knocking is a good way to wake someone up from sleep. May the Savior knock loudly so as to waken our sleepy hearts!

December 6th, Second Sunday of Advent

First Reading

*Comfort, give comfort to my people,
says your God.
Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her
that her service is at an end,
her guilt is expiated;
indeed, she has received from the hand of the LORD
double for all her sins.*

*A voice cries out:
In the desert prepare the way of the LORD!
Make straight in the wasteland a highway for our God!
Every valley shall be filled in,
every mountain and hill shall be made low;
the rugged land shall be made a plain,
the rough country, a broad valley.
Then the glory of the LORD shall be revealed,
and all people shall see it together;
for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.*

*Go up on to a high mountain,
Zion, herald of glad tidings;
cry out at the top of your voice,
Jerusalem, herald of good news!
Fear not to cry out
and say to the cities of Judah:
Here is your God!
Here comes with power
the Lord GOD,
who rules by his strong arm;
here is his reward with him,
his recompense before him.
Like a shepherd he feeds his flock;
in his arms he gathers the lambs,
carrying them in his bosom,
and leading the ewes with care. - Isaiah 40:1-5, 9-11*

Second Reading

*Do not ignore this one fact, beloved,
that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years
and a thousand years like one day.
The Lord does not delay his promise, as some regard "delay,"*

*but he is patient with you,
not wishing that any should perish
but that all should come to repentance.
But the day of the Lord will come like a thief,
and then the heavens will pass away with a mighty roar
and the elements will be dissolved by fire,
and the earth and everything done on it will be found out.*

*Since everything is to be dissolved in this way,
what sort of persons ought you to be,
conducting yourselves in holiness and devotion,
waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God,
because of which the heavens will be dissolved in flames
and the elements melted by fire.
But according to his promise
we await new heavens and a new earth
in which righteousness dwells.
Therefore, beloved, since you await these things,
be eager to be found without spot or blemish before him, at peace. – 2 Peter 3:8-14*

The Gospel

The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ the Son of God.

*As it is written in Isaiah the prophet:
Behold, I am sending my messenger ahead of you;
he will prepare your way.
A voice of one crying out in the desert:
“Prepare the way of the Lord,
make straight his paths.”
John the Baptist appeared in the desert
proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.
People of the whole Judean countryside
and all the inhabitants of Jerusalem
were going out to him
and were being baptized by him in the Jordan River
as they acknowledged their sins.
John was clothed in camel’s hair,
with a leather belt around his waist.
He fed on locusts and wild honey.
And this is what he proclaimed:
“One mightier than I is coming after me.
I am not worthy to stoop and loosen the thongs of his sandals.
I have baptized you with water;
he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit” -Mark 1:1-8*

St. John the Baptist was so wonderful and great in the eyes of the people of Israel that it was hard for them to decide if Jesus was even greater: the Christ, the Anointed One, the Messiah of the Jews. John was an ascetic, celibate, and pure like the Nazarites of old who lived a life of abnegation and penance and expectation of the immediate arrival of the Savior. He had been a boarder in the desert with the Essenes in Qumran, taught to live in constant expectation of the coming of the Holy One of Israel.

Jesus, the son of Mary, and also called the son of Joseph, lived a quiet, normal life. He lived and worked and rested and celebrated with the normal people of Nazareth and Galilee, his home region, following the normal rites and observances of the Pharisees. No one noticed him, and he did not catch anyone's attention until he was baptized by his cousin John in the Jordan River.

These were apparently very different men. John was a clearly prophetic and ascetic figure; Jesus was not at all ascetic, as his critics would later bring forth, but he was full of wonders and healings and deliverances.

Which kind of life are Christians supposed to follow? Are we supposed to be austere, fasting, abstaining from drink, living apart? Or are we supposed to be socially normal, affable, eating and drinking like everyone else?

This has been a problem in Christian history, especially if we consider the influence on Christianity of the various movements that have promoted abstinence from drink, and various other ascetic practices like fasting, not eating meat, not dancing or playing cards, and so on. The problem is that the moment someone is stricter than someone else, he gets a moral advantage and makes anyone who disagrees with him seem to be a slacker, a laxist, a less-than-perfectly-moral person. Then those others begin to get defensive and start to minimize the importance of penance and self-denial. One extreme begets another.

But Jesus the Savior and his forerunner John the Baptist were different. They were not competitors in the holiness contest. The Baptist led a life of austerity, denying himself the usual comforts of human social life. He was not the sort you would invite to a dinner party. The Savior led a life that observed only the normal requirements of the old law, the fasts and feasts of the people of Israel, and even then he justified his followers' gleaning of grain on the Sabbath (Matt. 12:1-13).

The fact is that even the life of Jesus the Son of God would not be enough to demonstrate every form of Christian life that is helpful or needful for the human race. St. Thomas Aquinas teaches that for this reason we have the example of both Jesus and John, so that the hard ascetical route may not be abandoned by Christians and that the hopeful and merciful concessions of the Savior may not be abandoned, either.

Thomas teaches in his *Summa* that the effects of austerity that are natural in the spiritual life can also be accomplished by the immediate contact with the sacred humanity of Christ Jesus, who is able to bring about the same spiritual effects by the very power of his divine nature:

Just as by abstinence other men acquire the power of self-restraint, so also Christ, in himself and in those that are his, subdued the flesh by the power of His Godhead. Wherefore, as we read Matthew 9:14, the Pharisees and the disciples of John fasted, but not the disciples of Christ. On which Bede comments, saying that “John drank neither wine nor strong drink: because abstinence is meritorious where the nature is weak. But why should our Lord, whose right by nature it is to forgive sins, avoid those whom he could make holier than such as abstain?” (III, Q40, A2, ad. 2).

This is a beautiful truth: that even if we have not been so penitent and austere as to do great penance, that the Lord himself will, by the power of his divinity, accomplish such good things in us as would have been accomplished otherwise by penance.

The fruit of this consideration is simply that we should have constant recourse to the sacred humanity of the Savior in the Blessed Sacrament. He will heal and uplift and perfect all of our faults and sins by the power of the same human nature with which he instructed and corrected his disciples.

Yet, in the meantime, as we reflect on how good the Lord has been to us, we might also consider how we should be more generous in doing penance and denying ourselves.

May St. John the Baptist, whom the Church invokes in each and every Mass in the Roman Canon and then *Confiteor*, obtain for us the grace to love the Savior in his mild mercy and kindness to us as we seek to prepare for his coming!

December 8th, Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary

Reading 1

*After the man, Adam, had eaten of the tree,
the LORD God called to the man and asked him, "Where are you?"
He answered, "I heard you in the garden;
but I was afraid, because I was naked,
so I hid myself."
Then he asked, "Who told you that you were naked?
You have eaten, then,
from the tree of which I had forbidden you to eat!"
The man replied, "The woman whom you put here with me
she gave me fruit from the tree, and so I ate it."
The LORD God then asked the woman,
"Why did you do such a thing?"
The woman answered, "The serpent tricked me into it, so I ate it."
Then the LORD God said to the serpent:
"Because you have done this, you shall be banned
from all the animals
and from all the wild creatures;
on your belly shall you crawl,
and dirt shall you eat
all the days of your life.
I will put enmity between you and the woman,
and between your offspring and hers;
he will strike at your head,
while you strike at his heel."
The man called his wife Eve,
because she became the mother of all the living. – Genesis 3:9-15,20*

Reading 2

*Brothers and sisters:
Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ,
who has blessed us in Christ
with every spiritual blessing in the heavens,
as he chose us in him, before the foundation of the world,
to be holy and without blemish before him.
In love he destined us for adoption to himself through Jesus Christ,
in accord with the favor of his will,
for the praise of the glory of his grace
that he granted us in the beloved. In him we were also chosen,
destined in accord with the purpose of the One
who accomplishes all things according to the intention of his will,
so that we might exist for the praise of his glory,*

we who first hoped in Christ. – Ephesians 1:3-6,11-12

The Gospel

*The angel Gabriel was sent from God
to a town of Galilee called Nazareth,
to a virgin betrothed to a man named Joseph,
of the house of David,
and the virgin's name was Mary.
And coming to her, he said,
"Hail, full of grace! The Lord is with you."
But she was greatly troubled at what was said
and pondered what sort of greeting this might be.
Then the angel said to her,
"Do not be afraid, Mary,
for you have found favor with God.
Behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son,
and you shall name him Jesus.
He will be great and will be called Son of the Most High,
and the Lord God will give him the throne of David his father,
and he will rule over the house of Jacob forever,
and of his Kingdom there will be no end."
But Mary said to the angel,
"How can this be,
since I have no relations with a man?"
And the angel said to her in reply,
"The Holy Spirit will come upon you,
and the power of the Most High will overshadow you.
Therefore the child to be born
will be called holy, the Son of God.
And behold, Elizabeth, your relative,
has also conceived a son in her old age,
and this is the sixth month for her who was called barren;
for nothing will be impossible for God."
Mary said, "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord.
May it be done to me according to your word."
Then the angel departed from her. -**Luke 1:26-38***

Have you ever been at a family gathering and one of your elders or siblings tells a story of what you were like when you were little?

This happened to me just this Thanksgiving. My brother, who likes to embarrass me, told everyone at the table—my abbot, my prior, and the others there—examples of how I used to act when I was little. The stories were in fact not so embarrassing (they even put me in a good light), just a bit personal. And they really matched my present personality, so everyone else who heard them found them easy to believe.

I won't share the details, but I am sure we all get the situation and the point: there is so much more about us than what the people who know us see and understand. But if they were to learn more about us from the time before they knew us, they would see the continuity with our present personality. And they would enjoy being in on the private details of our story.

Everyone likes to hear stories of great public figures from the time when they were just little people, hidden from the world. I can remember the story of little George Washington and the cherry tree. As a kid, I believed it, and given his later accomplishments I can say with the Italians, *Se non é vero, é ben trovato*: “Even if it didn't happen that way, it still rings true.” (If any current day readers—millennials and other deprived generations—have never heard the story of George and the tree, they should “google” it and find out. Then they will realize how much richer was the fare that was served up to prior generations, and they might understand their parents a little better!)

There are no individuals in human history whose lives have generated more interest than Jesus and Mary. From the earliest days of the Christian era the faithful have been eager to follow the details of their lives and have sought to satisfy their devout curiosity with more scenes of their lives, and in particular of their childhood, than are available in the canonical scriptures.

Pope Benedict XVI did us all a favor by publishing his little volume on the so-called “infancy narratives” in the Gospels. He largely vindicates the traditional story against the rationalizing denials of modern scholars. The fact is that the most widely read account of the early life of Our Lady and the Savior in the ancient Church was not a canonical book of Scripture but the *Protoevangelium of James*, which gives an account of the birth and childhood of Our Lady and of her annunciation and the birth of the Savior. There are more early manuscripts of this work than of any of the Gospels.

Though not inspired Scripture, the *Protoevangelium* represented the popular traditions regarding Jesus, Mary, and John the Baptist coming from the Jewish Christian context of the church in Palestine before the Romans definitively drove out the Jews under the emperor Hadrian. Some elements of these stories were accepted as correct; others were rejected. Some recent scholarship, even by non-Catholics, has shown that many details of this purported work of St. James are historically credible beyond what modern scholars had been willing to believe

The elements that were judged reliable came in to the Church's worship and remain there until today. Just as the calendar of fixed feasts has a cycle that traces Our Lord's infancy throughout the year (March 25 his conception, May 31 the Visitation, December 25 his birth and so on), so too there is a little cycle for Our Lady (December 8 her conception, September 8 her birth, November 21 her presentation in the temple) and also of John the Baptist (his conception on September 23 in the Byzantine rite, which is a commemoration in the martyrology of his parents, Zachary and Elizabeth in the Roman rite; June 24 his birth, and August 3 his martyrdom). The Immaculate Conception of Our Lady, the solemnity we celebrate today, came into the calendar as the commemoration of the St. Ann's conceiving of her in her old age after being assured by an angel, along with her husband St. Joachim, that she would bear a daughter.

Popular accounts of the lives of the saints often have great historical value and theological and spiritual influence. We should not reject them by a kind of minimalism that is always asking whether the particular story is required for belief. When we love and admire an historical figure and we read his biography, we are disposed to believe what we read because it goes along with what we know about him. To be sure, one detail in the biography or another might be incorrect or exaggerated, but overall we are disposed to believe the whole story. Catholics should stop the reflexive dismissal of ancient traditions just because they are not “defined” teachings. This tendency is akin to reducing a biography to the minimum available in legal documents. It is not reasonable, it is not human, and it is boring. Your life is a lot more than what you can get on a web document search!

What is certain about Jesus and Mary is that we love them with all our hearts, and so we are very willing to believe all kinds of good things about them that others may tell us. Take a look at the lengthy and thoughtful meditations of the saints on the lives of Jesus and Mary. There is St, Bridget of Sweden, there is St, Gertrude, there is Margery Kempe, there is St, John Eudes, there is Venerable Mary of Agreda, and Blessed Ann Catherine Emmerich. Sophisticated people can scoff at these latter two, but Emmerich is a minor classic of Romantic German literature, highly regarded by Gerard Manley Hopkins and by Jacques and Raissa Maritain, and Mary of Agreda was the favorite reading of St. Junipero Serra, St. Katherine Drexel, and the newly beatified (less than a month ago!) Bl. Solanus Casey. For this Advent, we might take a look at some of these things. (There is a fine collection of them called *The Life of Mary as Seen by the Mystics*, published by Angelico Press.)

These works present highly imaginative accounts, but with much spiritual insight and often theological depth. Indeed, the great Abbot Gueranger, who practically created the liturgical movement and the revival of religious life in the nineteenth century, wrote a whole book vindicating Mary of Agreda’s *Mystical City of God*. Too bad for Bl. Solanus Casey, whose minimalist superiors made him stop promoting it to the people who came to him. It turns out that it was not the simple Solanus who was ignorant and unlearned, but his superiors.

After all the great Gueranger, who wrote a book defending these long and baroque meditations, was the one to whom Bl. Pope Pius IX entrusted the formulation of the dogmatic definition of the Immaculate Conception! Here is proof that the minimum of dogmatic precision does not exclude a maximum of loving devotion and willingness to believe every good thing of our dear Mother, the Virgin Mary, the daughter of old Joachim and Ann, spotless in her conception. May the beloved apostle John, who took Our Lady into his home, make us understand the meaning of his words, “Love believeth all things.”

December 13th – The Third Sunday of Advent

Reading 1

*The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me,
because the LORD has anointed me;
he has sent me to bring glad tidings to the poor,
to heal the brokenhearted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives
and release to the prisoners,
to announce a year of favor from the LORD
and a day of vindication by our God.
I rejoice heartily in the LORD,
in my God is the joy of my soul;
for he has clothed me with a robe of salvation
and wrapped me in a mantle of justice,
like a bridegroom adorned with a diadem,
like a bride bedecked with her jewels.
As the earth brings forth its plants,
and a garden makes its growth spring up,
so will the Lord GOD make justice and praise
spring up before all the nations. - Isaiah 61:1-2A,10-11*

Reading 2

*Rejoice always. Pray without ceasing.
In all circumstances give thanks,
for this is the will of God for you in Christ Jesus.
Do not quench the Spirit.
Do not despise prophetic utterances.
Test everything; retain what is good.
Refrain from every kind of evil.
May the God of peace make you perfectly holy
and may you entirely, spirit, soul, and body,
be preserved blameless for the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.
The one who calls you is faithful,
and he will also accomplish it. – 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24*

The Gospel

*A man named John was sent from God.
He came for testimony, to testify to the light,
so that all might believe through him.
He was not the light,
but came to testify to the light.
And this is the testimony of John.*

*When the Jews from Jerusalem sent priests
and Levites to him
to ask him, "Who are you?"
He admitted and did not deny it,
but admitted, "I am not the Christ."
So they asked him,
"What are you then? Are you Elijah?"
And he said, "I am not."
"Are you the Prophet?"
He answered, "No."
So they said to him,
"Who are you, so we can give an answer to those who sent us?
What do you have to say for yourself?"
He said:
"I am the voice of one crying out in the desert,
'make straight the way of the Lord,'"
as Isaiah the prophet said."
Some Pharisees were also sent.
They asked him,
"Why then do you baptize
if you are not the Christ or Elijah or the Prophet?"
John answered them,
"I baptize with water;
but there is one among you whom you do not recognize,
the one who is coming after me,
whose sandal strap I am not worthy to untie."
This happened in Bethany across the Jordan,
where John was baptizing. – **John 1:6-8,19-28***

Here are some wonderful and clear words that St. Thomas Aquinas uses when commenting about this passage from today's Old Testament lesson from the prophet Isaiah:

It is natural for every person that he loves the sight of the thing he loves, and the divine essence can only be seen by one who loves it. As it says in the book of Job: God shows his friends the light, that it is his possession (cf. Job 36:33, Vulgate version).

Great saints and the most abject of sinners all know what it is to have joy at the sight of the things they love. When you see an object or a person or an activity that you love, you immediately rejoice in it. This Sunday, the Church invites us to rejoice in the expectation of the coming of the Savior, whom we can see from afar. We already can feel the joy of the Christmas feast that is upon us, since we love the Savior who is about to be reborn in us in the joyful liturgical mysteries of his nativity.

Now, if we do not have this joy, then something must be standing in the way. In the first place, there may be some trial or sorrow we are undergoing that keeps us from seeing the Lord coming.

We are in some darkness and earnestly need the light that God “shows his friends.” Yes, we love him, but we do not see or feel his coming enough to have joy at the sight of it.

If we find ourselves in this weary or sad state of soul, we need to reach out to the Lord in prayer and to our neighbor in loving service and kindness. In this way we will be ready doing the Master’s work when he finally does come and knock, or arrives like a thief in the night by surprise, or comes in like the Bridegroom at his wedding feast.

All of these are descriptions of the Lord’s coming that have become familiar to us in the readings of Advent. Let’s take up our rosary or liturgy of the hours and go before the Lord in the Blessed Sacrament to get ready. Let’s determine for ourselves those works of mercy and forgiveness that we can accomplish in his service, ready with our lamps alight for his coming. Then we will truly see him and rejoice.

Yet there is another terrible possibility that may explain why we do not have joy at the sight of the Lord as he comes to save us. As St. Thomas says, God can be seen only by those who love him. This is ultimately true of heaven and the vision of God face to face, but it is also true of the other ways in which he shows himself to us.

Is it possible that right now I do not love the Lord and so do not rejoice even when I do see him coming? God forbid, we would say. Indeed, few of us—if any—would say, “I do not love God.” Yet the reality of sin tells us that we are able to love created things, the gifts God has made, more than we love him or his will.

The drunk rejoices at the sight of a drink, the unchaste at the sight of impure actions, the envious at the misfortune of the one he envies, and so on. When we love created goods, but not in the way that God wants us to love them, then we may rejoice on seeing them, but we do not rejoice in seeing *him*, who gave them to us to use rightly and gratefully. This is true of all sin, whether grave or lesser, but it is especially true of grave sin, which truly deprives us of our love of God.

That’s a pretty grim picture to be sure, but wait and see: there is a lot of hope in it. Why is the Lord coming at all? We hear from the beloved apostle, “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners,” and “If anyone sin he has an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous, and he is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only, but for those of the whole world.” We hear from St. Paul, “While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.”

If I am a such as sinner as to be missing out on the joy of seeing the Lord in his coming, it is just for me that he is coming. I am just the one he is coming to save, and because he loves me, he rejoices at the sight of me, as any man does at the sight of the one he loves. What sinner then can be sad, if he consider the Lord’s great love for him? All we have to do is repent today, and day after day as we rise and fall, looking to the love of Lord, the “friend of sinners.”

Thus, in addition to prayer and works of mercy, we can guarantee our joy now and at Christmas by making an act of sorrow for our sins, telling God that we are sorry because he is so good and worthy of all our love, and then getting to confession to receive the security of God’s pardon in the wonderful sacrament of repentance and reconciliation. Don’t let the devil rob you of your

Christmas joy. As long as you continually look to the Lord in repentance, you will be loving the sight of the one you love, and he will show you his light, his very self, as his friend.

December 20th – The Fourth Sunday of Advent

Reading 1

*When King David was settled in his palace,
and the LORD had given him rest from his enemies on every side,
he said to Nathan the prophet,
“Here I am living in a house of cedar,
while the ark of God dwells in a tent!”
Nathan answered the king,
“Go, do whatever you have in mind,
for the LORD is with you.”
But that night the LORD spoke to Nathan and said:
“Go, tell my servant David, ‘Thus says the LORD:
Should you build me a house to dwell in?’”
“It was I who took you from the pasture
and from the care of the flock
to be commander of my people Israel.
I have been with you wherever you went,
and I have destroyed all your enemies before you.
And I will make you famous like the great ones of the earth.
I will fix a place for my people Israel;
I will plant them so that they may dwell in their place
without further disturbance.
Neither shall the wicked continue to afflict them as they did of old,
since the time I first appointed judges over my people Israel.
I will give you rest from all your enemies.
The LORD also reveals to you
that he will establish a house for you.
And when your time comes and you rest with your ancestors,
I will raise up your heir after you, sprung from your loins,
and I will make his kingdom firm.
I will be a father to him,
and he shall be a son to me.
Your house and your kingdom shall endure forever before me;
your throne shall stand firm forever.”— 2 Samuel 7:1-5,8B-12,14A,16*

Reading 2

*Brothers and sisters:
To him who can strengthen you,
according to my gospel and the proclamation of Jesus Christ,
according to the revelation of the mystery kept secret for long ages*

*but now manifested through the prophetic writings and,
according to the command of the eternal God,
made known to all nations to bring about the obedience of faith,
to the only wise God, through Jesus Christ
be glory forever and ever.
Amen. – Romans 16:25-27*

The Gospel

*The angel Gabriel was sent from God
to a town of Galilee called Nazareth,
to a virgin betrothed to a man named Joseph,
of the house of David,
and the virgin's name was Mary.
And coming to her, he said,
"Hail, full of grace! The Lord is with you."
But she was greatly troubled at what was said
and pondered what sort of greeting this might be.
Then the angel said to her,
"Do not be afraid, Mary,
for you have found favor with God.*

*"Behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son,
and you shall name him Jesus.
He will be great and will be called Son of the Most High,
and the Lord God will give him the throne of David his father,
and he will rule over the house of Jacob forever,
and of his kingdom there will be no end."
But Mary said to the angel,
"How can this be,
since I have no relations with a man?"
And the angel said to her in reply,
"The Holy Spirit will come upon you,
and the power of the Most High will overshadow you.
Therefore the child to be born
will be called holy, the Son of God.
And behold, Elizabeth, your relative,
has also conceived a son in her old age,
and this is the sixth month for her who was called barren;
for nothing will be impossible for God."
Mary said, "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord.
May it be done to me according to your word."
Then the angel departed from her. -Luke 1:26-38*

Nazareth. It's a place, a town. It's still there after thousands of years. People live there and try to survive under very difficult political and social conditions. There are the secular Israelis who live

in the new town above the old, and there are the Muslim Palestinians who are citizens of Israel, and then there are the remnant of the once numerous Christian population who have not left under stress from the former two groups. This year, as in many recent Christmases, the Christians of Nazareth have a challenging feast to celebrate.

It was in this town that the Most Holy Trinity revealed the mystery of the Incarnation of the eternal Son of God of the Virgin Mary by the overshadowing of the Holy Spirit. In a certain sense, this town is more graced and more glorious than Jerusalem or Bethlehem—or Rome, or Lourdes, or Fatima—because not only did God and the mother of God come there, but this is the place where God became man, where the divine maternity occurred, where heaven most perfectly and mysteriously joined with earth. As it says over the altar in the house of Mary at the shrine today “Here the Word was made flesh.”

But what was the occasion or circumstance of so infinitely overwhelming a mystery as God’s assuming to himself a human nature, body and soul? For this we can look at the Gospel according to St. Luke for the essentials. That is the text we hear proclaimed today. But if we want to know the concrete circumstances of the event of the Annunciation described in today’s Gospel, we have to look at the Gospel of James.

Now this Gospel is not precisely revealed or part of the Bible approved by the Church, but it is the oldest and most widely read account of the conception and birth of the Savior. Its details have entered into Christian iconography and liturgical poetry and pilgrimage.

According to this account, well borne out by the modern city of Nazareth, the Holy Virgin was drawing water at the town well when the angel of God spoke to her without being seen. Then she went home, and as she was spinning wool yarn of purple for use in the holy temple in Jerusalem, the angel Gabriel appeared to her.

There are two things that are helpful to us today in this account. One is that God reveals himself to us first of all by *hearing*. That is, we need to *listen* to the word of God first before we can claim any right to have a deeper understanding. Many people today do not even try to listen to God’s word before giving their opinion or evaluating it. The sincere and humble soul, on the other hand, is always eager to hear the word and to consider it prayerfully before acting.

Then, of course, God can reveal himself by showing something to our sight. Sight is the most noble and most informative of our senses, so it is to be expected that God will give us something for our sight. What do we see? Our Lady saw an angel in human form who swiftly “departed from her.” We, on the other hand, must not presume on so lofty a vision. Rather, we should trust the Lord who says, “Who sees you sees me.” Our neighbor is the revelation of the Lord to us. Our neighbor tells us what the Lord needs from us: love, nourishment, rest, instruction, correction, encouragement, prayer, warmth. This was what Our Lady was doing at her annunciation, making yarn, accomplishing something for the edification of her fellow Jews.

There is no doubt that the Archangel Gabriel is a lesser being than the Blessed Mother. He greeted her with great respect as to a superior. We would do well to treat everyone as better than we are, as the objects of our humble service. If majestic angels can do this to those who are by

nature lower than them, surely we can do it to those who are, like us, just “a little less than the angels.” We will see the Lord clearly and we will see the messengers of the Lord if we give ourselves before Christmas to the service of our neighbors.

This is the gift we can give the Lord this Christmas.

December 25th - Feast of the Nativity of Our Lord Jesus Christ

Reading 1

*The people who walked in darkness
have seen a great light;
upon those who dwelt in the land of gloom
a light has shone.
You have brought them abundant joy
and great rejoicing,
as they rejoice before you as at the harvest,
as people make merry when dividing spoils.
For the yoke that burdened them,
the pole on their shoulder,
and the rod of their taskmaster
you have smashed, as on the day of Midian.
For every boot that tramped in battle,
every cloak rolled in blood,
will be burned as fuel for flames.
For a child is born to us, a son is given us;
upon his shoulder dominion rests.
They name him Wonder-Counselor, God-Hero,
Father-Forever, Prince of Peace.
His dominion is vast
and forever peaceful,
from David's throne, and over his kingdom,
which he confirms and sustains
by judgment and justice,
both now and forever.
The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this! – Isaiah 9:1-6*

Reading 2

*Beloved:
The grace of God has appeared, saving all
and training us to reject godless ways and worldly desires
and to live temperately, justly, and devoutly in this age,
as we await the blessed hope,
the appearance of the glory of our great God
and savior Jesus Christ,*

*who gave himself for us to deliver us from all lawlessness
and to cleanse for himself a people as his own,
eager to do what is good. – Titus 2:11-14*

The Gospel

*In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus
that the whole world should be enrolled.
This was the first enrollment,
when Quirinius was governor of Syria.
So all went to be enrolled, each to his own town.
And Joseph too went up from Galilee from the town of Nazareth
to Judea, to the city of David that is called Bethlehem,
because he was of the house and family of David,
to be enrolled with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child.
While they were there,
the time came for her to have her child,
and she gave birth to her firstborn son.
She wrapped him in swaddling clothes and laid him in a manger,
because there was no room for them in the inn.*

*Now there were shepherds in that region living in the fields
and keeping the night watch over their flock.
The angel of the Lord appeared to them
and the glory of the Lord shone around them,
and they were struck with great fear.
The angel said to them,
“Do not be afraid;
for behold, I proclaim to you good news of great joy
that will be for all the people.
For today in the city of David
a savior has been born for you who is Christ and Lord.
And this will be a sign for you:
you will find an infant wrapped in swaddling clothes
and lying in a manger.”
And suddenly there was a multitude of the heavenly host with the angel,
praising God and saying:
“Glory to God in the highest
and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.” -Luke 2:1-14*

Bethlehem. The name means “house of bread.” It was in this town with such an evocative name that the One was born who said, “I am the bread which came down from heaven” and, “I am the bread of life.”

Ever since Constantine the Great built the Basilica of the Nativity in the fourth century, a basilica that still stands to this day, pilgrims have come to kneel and press their lips to the spot where the

Word Made Flesh was born. And yet directly above the place of the Lord's birth is the Greek altar on which is offered the Holy Eucharist, and right next to the shrine, in the same very room, there is the Latin altar on which Mass has been offered countless times, just within a few feet of the site of the manger.

Our Lord's birth in the manger of Bethlehem happened only once, but the even more powerful event of his offering of himself in the holy Mass occurs over and over again, day in and day out, from the rising of the sun to its setting. This offering makes every Catholic church—and also every other church that has the sacramental apostolic succession—a Bethlehem, a “house of bread.”

The Gospel according to St. Luke presents us with an amazing context for understanding Our Lord's birth at Bethlehem and his gift of himself in the Eucharist. In the second chapter of the Gospel he tells us that the Lord was born in a stable because “there was no room for them in the inn.” In fact the word translated as “inn” really just means “guest room” or upper room. Bethlehem was far too small to have a hotel! What the Gospel means is that the Holy Family had to stay in the back downstairs room, usually a cave in the hill from which the house was built, rather than in the upstairs room, which did not have livestock or the odors of the street.

This *very same word* is used again in the twenty-second chapter of the same Gospel when Our Lord tells his disciples about the arrangements for the Last Supper. The evangelist uses the very same word for the “upper guest room” of the institution of the Most Holy Eucharist as he uses to explain why the Holy Family was in the stable and not in the upper guest room of the house. How lovely a bracketing of the life of the Lord! Saint Luke is a consummate storyteller. Finally, the Lord, who had no suitable guest room for his birth in the town called “house of bread” now is able to perfect and finish his work in the upper guest room of the Sacrament! This room and every Catholic altar after become the new Bethlehem, the new “house of bread.”

Is there any room for the Lord in our own hearts? Is there a guest room ready and spread out for his feast-day dinner? We have no better way of celebrating Christmas, than *Christ's Mass*. In the stable of Bethlehem and in the Upper Room in Jerusalem the Lord comes to us in his very body born of the Virgin Mary. Thanks be to him who so generously has provided us with the banquet of eternal life, the very body, blood, soul, and divinity of Jesus, the holy child of Bethlehem.

Our modern life, with its multiple media and various means of communication, may seem to abolish all the symbolism of the scriptures. We Christians must, in spite of all the atmosphere of unbelief, continue to assert the presence and power among us of the body, blood, soul, and Godhead of the Son of God born for us at Bethlehem and on our altars. Amen.