

The Fourth Sunday of Advent – a liturgy for worship at home

If you have an Advent wreath or simply four candles to mark the Advent countdown to Christmas Day, you may like to light four_candles and say the following:

Introduction

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

In our worship today we are called to consider to what extent we are available to God; do we see what God wants to do in and through us? In our Gospel reading we are shown the marvellous example of Mary. Even if she did not see clearly all that it implied, she accepted her mission to become the mother of the Saviour. Strange as it may sound, we too are called to *give birth to Jesus*, we are called to bear him in our lives today. We too have to say Yes to God and to God's plans for us and for the world through us.

Act of Penitence

When the Lord comes, he will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness, and will disclose the purposes of the heart. Therefore, in the light of Christ, let us confess our failures sometimes or often to be as God has created and called us to be.

Heavenly Father, you exalted the humble and meek: give us humble and contrite hearts.

Lord, have mercy

Lord Jesus, you grew towards birth in Mary's womb: be planted also in our hearts and lives.

Christ, have mercy.

Holy Spirit, you overshadowed Mary, that she might become the God-bearer: fill us with your gifts that we too may show Christ to the world.

Lord, have mercy.

Almighty God, who in Jesus Christ has given us a kingdom that cannot be destroyed, forgive us our sins, open our eyes to your truth, strengthen us to do your will and give us the joy of your kingdom, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Act of Praise

Traditionally, the Gloria is not said or sung in Advent. However, you may like to say or sing a suitable Advent hymn such as the following which is particularly appropriate today:

The Angel Gabriel from heaven came,
his wings as drifted snow, his eyes as flame;
'All hail,' said he, 'thou lowly maiden Mary,
most highly favoured lady.' *Gloria!*

'For known a blessed mother thou shalt be,
all generations laud and honour thee,
thy Son shall be Immanuel, by seers foretold;
most highly favoured lady. *Gloria!*

Then gentle Mary meekly bowed her head,
'To me be as it pleaseth God,' she said,
'my soul shall laud and magnify his holy name:'
most highly favoured lady, *Gloria!*

Of her, Immanuel, the Christ was born
In Bethlehem, all on a Christmas morn,
and Christian folk throughout the world will ever say,
'most highly favoured lady.' *Gloria!*

(Basque Carol, paraphrased by Sabine Baring-Gould, 1834 – 1924)

Collect of the Day

Eternal God, as Mary waited for the birth of your Son, so we wait for his coming in glory; bring us through the birth pangs of this present age to see, with her, our great salvation in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Today's readings

A reading from the second book of Samuel

(7: 1 – 11 & 16)

When the king was settled in his house, and the LORD had given him rest from all his enemies around him, the king said to the prophet Nathan, "See now, I am living in a house of cedar, but the ark of God stays in a tent." Nathan said to the king, "Go, do all that you have in mind; for the LORD is with you."

But that same night the word of the LORD came to Nathan: Go and tell my servant David: Thus, says the LORD: Are you the one to build me a house to live in? I have not lived in a house since the day I brought up the people of Israel from Egypt to this day, but I have been moving about in a tent and a tabernacle. Wherever I have moved about among all the people of Israel, did I ever speak a word with any of the tribal leaders of Israel, whom I commanded to shepherd my people Israel, saying, "Why have you not built me a house of cedar?"

Now therefore thus you shall say to my servant David: Thus says the LORD of hosts: I took you from the pasture, from following the sheep to be prince over my people Israel; and I have been with you wherever you went, and have cut off all your enemies from before you; and I will make for you a great name, like the name of the great ones of the earth. And I will appoint a place for my people Israel and will plant them, so that they may live in their own place, and be disturbed no more; and evildoers shall afflict them no more, as formerly, from the time that I appointed judges over my people Israel; and I will give you rest from all your enemies. Moreover, the LORD declares to you that the LORD will make you a house.

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Psalm 89: 1 – 4 & 26 – 28

My song shall be always of the loving-kindness of the Lord: with my mouth will I proclaim your faithfulness throughout all generations.

I will declare that your love is established for ever; you have set your faithfulness as firm as the heavens.

For you said: 'I have made a covenant with my chosen one; I have sworn an oath to David my servant:

Your seed will I establish for ever and build up your throne for all generations.

He shall call to me, "You are my Father, my God, and the rock of my salvation;"

And I will make him my firstborn, the most high above the kings of the earth.

The love I have pledged to him will I keep for ever, and my covenant will stand fast with him.'

Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit. As it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be, world without end. Amen.

A reading from the letter of St Paul to the Romans (16:25-27)

Now to God who is able to strengthen you according to my gospel and the proclamation of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery that was kept secret for long ages but is now disclosed, and through the prophetic writings is made known to all the Gentiles, according to the command of the eternal God, to bring about the obedience of faith—to the only wise God, through Jesus Christ, to whom be the glory forever! Amen.

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Acclamation to greet the Gospel:

Alleluia, Alleluia!

I am the servant of the Lord;

Let it be to me according to your word.

Alleluia!

Hear the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ according to Luke (1: 26 – 38)

Glory to you, O Lord

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the House of David. The virgin's name was Mary.

And he came to her and said, 'Greetings, favoured one! The Lord is with you.'

But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary; for you have found favour with God. And now you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor

David. He will reign over the house of Jacob for ever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.'

Mary said to the angel, 'How can this be, since I have had no relations with a man. The angel said to her, '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 holy; he will be called Son of God. And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God.'

Then Mary said, 'Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.' Then the angel departed from her.

This is the Gospel of the Lord. Praise to you, O Christ.

Homily

I have always loved nativity plays. Of course, they embellish the Christmas story admirably and sometimes amusingly with imaginative or accidental variations. There is always a donkey, isn't there, whether real or imitation? My mother always remembered a scene from a nativity play at her primary school. Mary asks Joseph, 'I am expecting a baby so how am I going to get to Bethlehem?' Joseph replies in broad Yorkshire: 'Just jump up on this 'oss an' I'll tek thee.' My first memory is a little more sombre. I loved the play and Mary, of course, was played by the prettiest girl in the school. But at the end she stood up with the other cast members, took a bow as the audience applauded with gusto, and they all left the stage. But this 5-year old was very sad and almost in tears. Why? I was upset because they had left the baby Jesus in the manger all alone!

But it is even more sad that so many people have done that. They have left Jesus as a baby in his manger. They have never let Jesus grow up with them. He has not found a place to develop in their hearts and lives and they have never come to know him, and to know what he is about, what he means for them and for the world.

Beneath the poetic imagery and parable that is the Christmas story, there is a very real, grown up, down to earth, shocking message. It calls us to wake up and pay attention, and focus on the re-creative activity of God-with-us in the birth of a child, an event that threatens to turn the world upside down, or rather, challenges us to see the world right side up.

We are presented with a lowly unmarried girl from an obscure village in the Roman-occupied Jewish homeland. She becomes the vessel through which God makes himself present to the world. It is the way of God always to reverse the expectations of the comfortable and the privileged and the socially and religiously correct, and instead affirm the greatness and the value of those that nobody reckons count for much.

The child born to this lowly girl does not seek from us or from the world a seasonal warmth and charity which will go cold or lose its sparkle quicker than the seasonal bottle of bubbly. What he seeks, and the only homage or honour from us that he will recognise, is a generous commitment to making all the ways we live and work in our time and place reflect his balance of priorities.

Jesus calls us to be people who carry the possibility of new life for ourselves and our world by reflecting in our lives, our words, our actions, the nature of the Lord who demonstrated greatness with a bowl of water and a towel. He calls us to be like him, a living sacrifice who stooped down to serve and to give of himself so that others may find life and hope, and come to know where God really is, and that God is with them and for them in all the circumstances and challenges that life brings.

What we are really celebrating at Christmas is the costly risk of the Emmanuel, the God-with-us, who sought to bring power and hope and life into the very ordinary places of our world and to the lowliest and even seemingly hopeless situations of human life. Although Christmas is a glorious festival for us to celebrate, it is not necessarily a comfortable one. In fact, we should find it quite disturbing. God-with-us is indeed good news. But what God-with-us comes to show us and ask of us, if we are paying attention, challenges us to the core of our being.

If only we could take the risk of letting the message and meaning of Christmas invade and challenge every aspect of our lives. Not just for a season, as if we could then heave a sigh of relief and go back to so-called normal living, but letting it be the pattern of all our living. The Gospel today reminds us that all things are possible with God. That means all things are possible *for us* with God's help. With that assurance Mary responded in faith, 'Here I am, the servant of the Lord, let it be to me according to your word.'

Mary claims no virtue or merit. She is simply the recipient of God's grace. She has found the Lord's favour, which properly translated means undeserved or unmerited love. As she says in her song, the Magnificat, 'he has looked with favour on the lowliness, the nothingness, of his servant.' Mary is humanity's representative, and certainly the prototype and stand-in for all of us who claim to be Christian. Are we humble, committed and brave enough also to say 'yes' to God, 'let it be?' Or as the Christian author Kathleen Norris puts it, 'When the mystery of God's love breaks through into my consciousness, do I run from it? Or am I *virgin* enough to respond from my deepest, truest self, and say something new, a 'yes' that will change me forever?' ¹

(¹ Kathleen Norris, *Amazing Grace, A Vocabulary of Faith*, as quoted in Richard Rohr's online *Daily Meditation*, 8th December 2020)

A few moments of silent reflection is recommended

The Profession of Faith, either the following or one of the traditional creeds:

We believe in God the Father from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named.

We believe in God the Son, who lives in our hearts through faith, and fills us with his love.

We believe in God the Holy Spirit, who strengthens us with power from on high. We believe in one God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Prayers of Intercession

Let us pray now to our Father, who loves and cares for us and all of His Creation.

God Most high, you overshadow us with the power of your Holy Spirit; bring to birth the promise of your hope in lives of holiness and grace, especially our Church leaders, Justin our Archbishop, Robert and David our Bishops, Archdeacon David and John our priest. We thank you for the blessings which you have bestowed upon our Church of St. Francis; help us to be the church you want us to be, a place where all are welcomed and loved. Give courage to your whole Church to be servants of your will and faithfully live and proclaim your Gospel. We ask your blessing on those who are unable to be with us today and each family represented here.

Lord, Hear usLord, Graciously hear us

God Most High you have set before all leaders a vision of true hope, justice and peace. Guide them all in your paths and give them strength to the right thing in their decision making. With you nothing is impossible. We pray especially that peace would reign in your Holy city of Jerusalem this Christmas time.

Lord, Hear usLord, Graciously hear us

God Most High, soon approaches the day a mother brought into the world the one who was to become the Saviour of the whole world. We give thanks for the obedience and faith of Mary. We pray for all mothers, expectant mothers and those whose hearts ache with longing for a child. Bless those who assist in bringing life into the world, our midwives, nurses and doctors. May each child know themselves to be loved and valued.

Lord, Hear usLord, Graciously hear us

God Most High, we ask for your healing and complete wholeness for those who are infirm, sick, injured or lonely especially those known to us. We ask that you will draw near to those who no longer have the strength, will or faith to reach out to you. We pray particularly for Margaret Rainton, Carol Hart, Petrina Thompson, and others known to us. We remember too all who have been affected by Covid 19 and pray for their healing.

Lord, Hear usLord, Graciously hear us

God Most High, even in the midst of our mortality you offer salvation through Jesus Christ. For those who are nearing death, remove all fear and may they see your wonderful light shining brightly and receive it gladly. Comfort the grieving and give them hope.

Merciful Father, accept these prayers for the sake of your Son, our Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

We are the children of God. Let us pray the prayer of Jesus to our Father in heaven:

Our Father.....

You may wish to offer this or an alternative prayer of spiritual communion, and/or in silence just sit in the peace of the ever-present Lord for a while.

Thanks be to you, Lord Jesus Christ,
for all the benefits you have given me,
for all the pains and insults you have borne for me.
Since I cannot now receive you sacramentally,
I ask you to come spiritually into my heart.

O most merciful redeemer, friend and brother,
may I know you more clearly,
love you more dearly,
and follow you more nearly, day by day. Amen.

Concluding Prayer

Heavenly Father, who chose the Blessed Virgin Mary to be the mother of the promised Saviour; fill us your servants with your grace, that in all things we may embrace your holy will and with her rejoice in your salvation, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Final reflection and Blessing

Christmas is now very near. With the Blessed Virgin Mary we wait for the Lord's coming. With her we say: we are the servants of the Lord; we want to do his will and to give his Son for all to share. In order that we may do this we ask for God's blessing:

May the God of peace make you perfect and holy, and keep you safe and blameless, in spirit, soul and body, for the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ; and the blessing of God almighty, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, be upon you and remain with you, and with those you love and pray for, today and always. Amen.

Let us go in peace and live in the joy of knowing that the Lord is near. Thanks be to God.