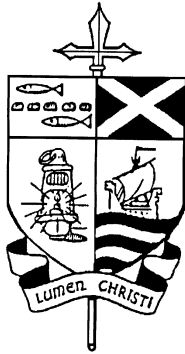


Reflections

for

Advent & Christmas 2008/2009

The Year of Mark



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INTRODUCTION

Pope Benedict has named this year - 29th June 2008 to 29th June 2009 - as the **Year of Paul**.

In response to this invitation we will reflect on the second readings of our Lectionary, most of which come from St. Paul's writings. Those that do not are the Second Sunday of Advent (2 Peter 3, 8-14) and the Baptism of the Lord (Acts 10, 34 -38).

First Sunday of Advent

LET YOUR FACE SHINE ON US AND WE SHALL BE SAVED

1 Corinthians 1, 3-9

St. Paul, introducing his long first letter to the Christians at Corinth, is full of thanksgiving for the gifts that they have received in becoming Christians. Some of these gifts, although entrusted to individual members of the Community, have important communal impact; such would be the gifts like teaching, preaching and so forth. These gifts enable all members of the community to fulfil their Christian vocation.

This Corinthian Community was particularly well-endowed with the gifts of the Spirit, which at best enabled its members to remain "*steady and without blame*" for the day of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Advent begins with recalling that the final outcome of our Christian lives is to remain faithful until the end. The end is not a dead end, but is the person of Jesus Christ waiting for us, revealed fully, a final expression of the fidelity of God. The whole Christian life is about journeying to the Lord.

The Collect of the Mass puts it this way:

"Increase our strength of will for doing good, that Christ may find an eager welcome at his coming and call us to his side in the Kingdom of Heaven".

The second coming of Jesus is not something to dread, but to await with a living faith, hope and love.

Pray for a sense of direction in life ~ a journey to the Lord

(see also Isaiah 63, 16-17; 64, 1.3-8 and Mark 13, 33-37)

Second Sunday of Advent

WAITING FOR THE LORD

2 Peter 3, 8-14

Peter's Second Letter presents the themes central to early Advent:

- the end of time
- the final form of the Kingdom
- the Lord's Coming as something we can profoundly desire and wait for patiently.

The author has no doubt that the Lord is in charge and will come in his own time. God is not playing games with us but, as the text says, "*The Lord is not being slow to carry out his promises as anybody else might be called slow; but he is being patient with you all wanting nobody to be lost and everybody to be brought to change his ways*".

The Lord does not keep us waiting in order to catch us out. He takes his time so we can grow into holiness and have time to change to do so.

Almost by contrast, the author then talks of the end coming suddenly and destructively. We will not notice and will then be caught unawares. Sin in our lives can dull our ability to discern and respond to God's actions.

As you wait for the Lord, "*live holy and saintly lives*"; long for (deeply desire) that day of the Lord to come. We are not awaiting hellfire and destruction, but a "*new Heaven and a new Earth*". The newness of the Heaven and Earth is being at rights with God, which is the natural outcome of life without "*spot or stain*". One could almost hear an undercurrent – if we are at rights with God, there could be a knock-on effect in the rest of Creation!

The central theme of Advent keeps returning. We do have an end time and place to go, but our journey there is marked by patiently developing a life of holiness and peace. When we arrive at the new Heaven and Earth, we shall belong because we have allowed the Lord to change us during the course of this life. "*Since everything is coming to an end....., we should be living holy and saintly lives.*"

Pray to become holy

(see also Isaiah 40, 1-5 & 9-11; Mark 1, 1-8)

Third Sunday of Advent

GAUDETE IN DOMINO

1 Thessalonians 5, 16-24

In this Advent the second readings have kept before us how we should live while we wait for "*the Coming of Our Lord Jesus Christ*". As the Christian waits and lives, he/she is invited to "*be happy at all times*" and "*pray constantly and give thanks*".

So the Advent Christian is one who is:-

- Full of joy
- Committed to a life of prayer
- Is full of thanks

The invitation to "*be happy at all times*" is really challenging! In the light of how life can deal out difficult hands, how can we possibly "be happy at all times" – surely that would be impossible! However this brief pen picture of the Christian gives us some insight into how we could be, as we wait for the Coming. There is significant emphasis on the fact that God will not let us down: "*God has called you and he will not fail you*". Also "*the Lord will keep you safe and blameless, Spirit, Soul and Body for the Coming of Our Lord Jesus Christ*".

If we use Advent well, it would mean that we spend time in prayer, we show joy as a permanent feature of life and we show signs of thanks for all the gifts that make up our lives. It is important to appreciate that the joy referred to comes from deep within us, and can cope with the inevitable negative elements that are a normal part of anyone's life. (There is a Eucharistic flavour to the Christian's life.)

Our response to "*Be happy at all times*" is a clear sign of the presence of the Spirit.

Pray for the Spirit of joy and prayer

(see also Isaiah 61, 1-2: 10-11; John 1, 6-18: 19-28)

Fourth Sunday of Advent

OBEDIENCE OF FAITH

Romans 16, 25-27

As we approach the great feast of Christmas we are asked to hear and reflect on an excerpt from one of St. Paul's greatest letters – to the Romans.

We are asked to contemplate "*a mystery kept secret for endless ages*". This mystery is in the person of Jesus Christ. He must be broadcast to Pagans everywhere to bring them to the obedience of faith.

Taking Jesus to the Gentiles is what God had planned and the way he wants things to be. What is interesting is in the middle of this Paul makes the lovely affirmation about God: "*He alone is Wisdom*".

The wisdom is in the way that God has made manifest and spread the mystery. This is not a mystery that has a solution - it is a mystery that contains deep within it such reality and meaning that the only appropriate response to it is what Paul calls the "*obedience of faith*".

Another way of putting this is to say that the appropriate response is worship and an acceptance of a gift with thanksgiving. Such is the meaning of the prayer that finishes this section, "*Give glory therefore to him through Jesus Christ for ever and ever, amen*".

On this Sunday of Advent the mother of Jesus is presented as the One who exemplifies the obedience of faith to a high degree in the way she responded to the invitation of the Lord to become the mother of the "Son of the Most High".

The invitation to us is that the response of the obedience of faith involves our worship both in ritual, in thinking and behaviour.

"*Be it done to me according to your Word*" is a perfect expression of the obedience of faith.

Pray for faith in the Word made flesh

(see also 2 Samuel 7, 1-5: 8-12: 14-16; Luke 1, 26-38)

CHRISTMAS 2008/2009

The celebration of Christmas is spread over a couple of weeks or so. It starts with the vigil Mass of Christmas and ends with the Feast of the Baptism.

It is an interesting collection of Feasts. We have the Solemnities and Feasts of Christ: Christmas, the Epiphany and the Baptism; the Solemnity of Our Lady (1st January); The Holy Family, and a number of Saints: Stephen, John, The Innocents, Thomas of Canterbury and the two great Cappadocian theologians, Basil and Gregory Nazianzen.

The Incarnation brings into existence a solidarity between God and us that is captured not only by the person of Jesus, truly God and truly Man, but by the various people surrounding Jesus, not least his mother.

In this section I will look at the mystery of Christmas through the second readings given to us by the liturgy of the Church, many of which are drawn from St. Paul.



Christmas Day

"HE IS THE RADIANT LIGHT OF GOD'S GLORY
AND THE PERFECT COPY OF HIS NATURE"

Titus 2, 11-14 & Titus 3, 4-7

There are two Pauline readings that can engage our attention today and they are both written to Titus.

The first point that I want to underline is that Christmas celebrates a revelation of God and his purposes that changes everything – the gift empowers us to live in a different way.

Our texts talk about "*God's Grace has been revealed*" and "*when the kindness and love of God our Saviour for humankind was revealed*". It is plainly God's initiative for our benefit. We did not arrange this ourselves. It is pure gift.

God was not responding to us because we had achieved a goodness that needed reward. From the heart of God comes an action that is driven by compassion for a race that had gone very wrong and had lost its way badly. God had come among us to enable us to live in a very different way. To our shame, sin had taken us in hand and controlled us in a completely destructive way. We are now to seek the things of God as a priority, and to stop looking for ourselves. We are now to become a people for God, and because of that to "*have no ambition except to do good*".

We have also been put back on track. We are no longer to pursue wickedness (that is, the world revolves around me) but, in doing good, we are back on the road to eternal life. We are renewed by the gift of the Spirit which Jesus has made available to us. As our text at the Dawn Mass says "*He did this so that we should be justified by His Grace, to become heirs looking forward to inheriting eternal life*".

Pray for the joy of the Spirit

*(see also Isaiah 62, 1-5; 9, 1-7; 62, 11-12; 52, 7-10; Hebrews 13, 16-17 & 22-25;
Hebrews 1, 1-6; Matthew 1, 1-25; Luke 2, 1-14; 2, 15-20; John 1, 1-18)*

Holy Family

FAMILY LIFE IN THE LORD

Colossians 3, 12-21

This reading from St. Paul outlines a community spirituality that makes sense in a range of communities and therefore can appropriately be applied to that basic community we know as the family.

The first issue is "*Who are you?*" Paul gives the only answer possible: "*God's chosen race*". Everything we are and do starts from there. We are chosen because God loves us. Power that chooses us and transforms us is the power of love. Because of that love which transforms, we are called to "*be clothed in sincere compassion, in kindness and humility, gentleness and patience*".

We are called to bear with each other and forgive. The reason we can do this is love. This underpins the whole Christian way of life.

The outcome is peace and the ability to show that we are chosen and are interrelated by being members of one body.

Then follows a more precise description of what being chosen can do to our relationships: "*Teach each other, advise each other, pray together and give thanks*".

"Always be thankful", "never say or do anything except in the name of the Lord Jesus giving thanks to God the Father through him".

Paul has in view a community that is thoroughly Eucharistic.

Then, in the light of what we are as a community of believers, Paul becomes practical about relationships between husbands, wives and children. In day-to-day living we are asked to do what is pleasing to God and in keeping with being God's chosen people.

Pray for our families

(see also Ecclesiasticus 3, 2-6; 12-14; Luke 2, 22-40)

The Solemnity of the Mother of God

"BORN OF A WOMAN"

Galatians 4, 4-7

The main issue of the Letter to the Galatians concerns whether the gift of faith that Christ has made possible was sufficient to put us at rights with God, or whether one still had to seek righteousness through the observance of the Law of Moses. Paul, a conscientious observer of the Law in his Jewish days, had no doubt that the Law could not bring salvation. Only faith in Christ brought salvation. He is God's gift to us.

The passage the Church puts before us today is recalling to the Galatian Christians precisely what God had achieved for us in Jesus.

He stresses that Jesus came by his Father's appointed plan to rescue subjects of the Law from the limitation of the Law so that we can become adopted sons and daughters of the Father that Jesus makes possible and the Holy Spirit brings to actuality. We are heirs because the Holy Spirit enables us to be heirs and not slaves.

The vision of what Jesus achieves for us, and what observance of the Law cannot, is powerfully expressed. Why the Church uses this text on this day is fascinating. It is through the woman (Mary) that Jesus becomes one of us (a truly human being) and is able to overcome the limitations of the Law because he is subject to it.

Being subject to the Law is a lovely way to affirm the reality of Jesus' humanity. He is really human and yet he can transcend the Law and give us a gift that can never be demanded as a right or surpassed.

Mary is a part of that appointed "time" and will always be called blessed because of it.

Pray for a true devotion and love of Mary

(see also Numbers 6, 22-27; Luke 2, 16-21)

The Epiphany

JESUS IS FOR EVERYONE

Ephesians 3, 2-3a & 5-6

This lovely festival is about the catholicity of the mystery entrusted to Paul.

Paul is very aware of his own calling. He has been entrusted with the mystery, the grace that God had earmarked for the Gentiles. It has been made known to Paul, that deeply committed Jew of the Pharisee tradition, and he now is called and mandated to make this grace and mystery available to the whole of humanity.

The extra dimension that the Epiphany brings to our Christmas celebration is that the whole of humanity is involved in it.

The way the mystery has come to the whole human race is through the Apostles and Prophets. Paul himself is one of them. The ultimate aim of this mystery is that the Pagans now "*share the same inheritance*". They are a part of the same body (of Christ) and belong to Christ. The Non-Jews have been given the same promise, namely that they will inherit what is Christ's: eternal life.

It is the same Jesus who brings to both Jews and Gentiles, through the Gospel, his own inheritance as Son of God.

Let us rejoice in God's catholic and unconditional love, made manifest and available in Jesus Christ.

Pray for the Mission of the Church

(see also Isaiah 60, 1-6; Matthew 2, 1-12)

The Baptism of Christ

THIS IS MY BELOVED SON

Acts 10, 34-38

This text is not Pauline, as is plain, but the thought train in Peter's sermon could equally have come from Paul. As we saw in the Epiphany we meet again the declaration "*Jesus Christ is Lord of all*".

We are first confronted by a statement that was cited in a key place in the Second Vatican Council in the Constitution on the Church. It is worth hearing it again and again: "*The truth, I have now come to realise, is that God does not have favourites but that anybody of any nationality who fears God and does what is right is acceptable to him*". It can remind us of that passage in Paul's Letter to the Philippians, where we are encouraged to let our minds be filled with "*everything that is true, everything that is noble, everything that is good and pure, everything that we love and honour and everything that can be thought virtuous or worthy of praise*". All that is humanly wholesome is a clear indication that Jesus and his Spirit are at work.

This feast of the Baptism of Jesus is the Lord entering into his ministry. In the first instance he is sent to his own people, following up the revelation that is captured by the expression 'the law and the prophets'. He did this "*anointed with the Holy Spirit and with power because God was with him*".

Among his own people Jesus went doing good and curing all who had fallen into the power of the devil. Jesus' earthly mission was lived mainly among his own people as he set about carrying out his Father's will. That ministry, post-Resurrection, will be carried out among all people in the power of the Spirit of Christ. In that way the ministry of Jesus becomes the mission of the Church.

The feast of the Baptism of Jesus is also a feast of the Holy Spirit who was with Jesus in his ministry. Through the death and resurrection the Spirit was poured out on his Church. It now guides us to bring to other people the Good News of Peace.

Pray for sensitivity to the guidance of the Holy Spirit

(see also Isaiah 42, 1-4, 6-7; Mark 1, 7-11)