



SUNDAY REFLECTION

For the prophets, salvation is closely connected to God's creative act: to be redeemed is to allow God to re-create us. When we partake of this Eucharist, that is what takes place in us. The darkness of sin is cast out, God's Spirit lives in us, helping us to join with other Christians to become His living Body on earth, bringing Jesus' peace and welcome to those whom we will encounter. In this way, the beautiful and powerful message of Christmas will continue to give light and hope to a struggling world.

STEWARDSHIP: The Gospel today tells of the Virgin Mary, pregnant herself, hurrying off to help her cousin Elizabeth. The model of good stewardship, she who had given herself to bear the Savior gave her time and love to others as well.

Baruch Spinoza

“Peace is not an absence of war, it is a virtue, a state of mind, a disposition for benevolence, confidence, justice.”

READINGS FOR CHRISTMAS

Night

Is. 9:1-6: The prophet speaks of a child being born who will bring liberation, illumination and peace.

Ti. 2:11-14: In Christ, god’s plan is revealed to us and our response is to live our lives according to this Good News.

Lk. 2:1-14: The humble birth of Christ takes place in Bethlehem and is heralded by the angel of the Lord to nearby shepherds.

Dawn

Is. 62:11-12: God comes into our lives to seek after us where we find ourselves lost and beyond hope. Isaiah announces salvation to a people that had suffered deportation and foreign rule. No longer shall they, shall we, be forsaken.

Ti. 3:4-7: Salvation is God’s free gift to us. We cannot and need not earn His love. Kindness and compassion move Him towards us.

Lk. 2:15-20: Following the message of the angel, the shepherds arrive at the manger and find Mary, Joseph and the Child. They share their story and their joy to the amazement of all. This news is too big to be understood immediately.

Day

Is. 52:7-10: The prophet speaks of a time of great joy as God’s salvation is seen by all people

Heb. 1:1-6: The coming of Christ surpasses any previous encounters with the divine because in Christ we truly meet God.

Jn. 1:1-18: The Word, who existed with God from the beginning, becomes flesh in order to make us children of God.

William Barclay

“That there was no room in the inn was symbolic of what was to happen to Jesus. The only place where there was room for Him was on the Cross.”

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE VISITATION

The Gospel today presents the visit of Mary, the Mother of God, with the child Jesus in her womb, to her kinswoman Elizabeth. The visit took place when Elizabeth was herself six months' pregnant with the forerunner of Christ, Saint John the Baptist. At the Annunciation of the Lord, the angel Gabriel, in response to Mary's question "How shall this be done, because I know not man?" (Lk. 1:34), had told her that "thy cousin Elizabeth, she also hath conceived a son in her old age; and this is the sixth month with her that is called barren: Because no work shall be

impossible with God" (Lk. 1:36-27). The evidence of her cousin's own near-miraculous conception had called forth Mary's *fiat*: "Behold I am the handmaid of the Lord; may be it done to me according to thy word." It is thus appropriate that the very next action of the Blessed Virgin that St. Luke records is Mary's "making haste" to visit her cousin.

Arriving at the house of Zachary (or Zacharias) and Elizabeth, Mary greets her cousin, and something wonderful happens: John the Baptist leaps in Elizabeth's womb (Lk. 1:41). As the Catholic Encyclopedia of 1913 puts it in its entry on the Visitation, the Virgin Mary's "presence and much more the presence of the Divine Child in her womb, according to the will of God, was to be the source of very great graces to the Blessed John, Christ's Forerunner."

The Cleansing of John the Baptist From Original Sin

John's leap was no ordinary movement of an unborn child, for as Elizabeth tells Mary, "as soon as the voice of thy salutation sounded in my ears, the infant in my womb leaped for joy" (Lk. 1:44). The joy of John the Baptist, the Church has held from the time of the early Church Fathers, came from his cleansing at that moment of Original Sin, in accordance with the angel Gabriel's prophecy to Zachary, before John's conception, that "he shall be filled with the Holy Ghost, even from his mother's womb" (Lk. 1:15). As the Catholic Encyclopedia notes in its entry on St. John the Baptist, "as the presence of any sin whatever is incompatible with the indwelling of the Holy Ghost in the soul, it follows that at this moment John was cleansed from the stain of original sin." Church fathers such as Pope Innocent III and St. Augustine have commented on this belief as well.

The Origin of Two Great Catholic Prayers

Elizabeth, too, is filled with joy, and cries out in words that would become part of the chief Marian prayer, the Hail Mary: "Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb." Elizabeth then acknowledges her cousin Mary as "the mother of my Lord" (Lk. 1:42-43). Mary responds with the Magnificat (Lk. 1:46-55), a canticle or biblical hymn that has become an essential part of the Church's evening prayer (vespers). It is a beautiful hymn of thanksgiving, glorifying God for choosing her to be the mother of His Son, as well as for His mercy "from generation until generations, to them that fear Him."

Mary's visit was a mission of charity

Mary responded "with haste" to the message of the Angel Gabriel to go and visit her cousin, Elizabeth. Although Mary had just learned of her own pregnancy with the Savior of the world, she went into the hill country to assist in the pregnancy of her cousin. Most women, having just been told that they were carrying a child, would not hurry along a long journey. But Mary did not neglect the needs of Elizabeth during her pregnancy and her visit is an example of a mission of charity.

Mother Teresa considered Mary at the Visitation a model for all Christian life

"In the mystery of the Annunciation and the Visitation, Mary is the very model of the life we should lead. First of all, she welcomed Jesus in her existence; then, she shared what she had received. Every time we receive Holy Communion, Jesus the Word becomes flesh in our life – gift of God who is at one and the same time beautiful, kind, unique. Thus, the first Eucharist was such: Mary's offering of her Son in her, in whom he had set up the first altar. Mary, the only one who could affirm with absolute confidence, "this is my body", from that first moment offered her own body, her strength, all her being, to form the Body of Christ." – Saint Teresa of Calcutta

A REFLECTION ON Mt. 1:18-24 Weekday reading from the 18th of Dec.

As the early Church reflected and prayed over the great deliverance from sin achieved by Jesus' death and Resurrection, they gradually came to see that the decisive moment did not begin on Calvary. The kingdom had begun much earlier when the Word of God first became flesh at the moment of Jesus' conception. Matthew traces the beginning of the Day of salvation back to the Annunciation when Mary first consented to be an instrument of God's plan. In our own lives, the great breakthroughs in the realm of the spirit and in our personal ventures did not come from nothing. They were the end product of a great deal of effort and preparation. If we have known moments of deep personal peace, it is because we have battled for it and had long before decided to submit ourselves to the presence of the Holy Spirit. In the same way, the great Passover of the Lord on Holy Thursday, Good Friday and Easter Sunday did not come from nowhere. It was the end result of a lifetime of Jesus' obedience to the Father that began when Mary as a young woman said, "Let it be done unto me according to thy word."

Our simple moments of submission can give birth to periods of great achievement.

ICON AT THE DOOR THE VIRGIN of the SIGN

Figures with hands raised in prayer, the "orans" pose, date from earliest Christian art and even before. Icons of Mary in this pose were first painted sometime in the 4th cent. An example, including the Savior on her breast but without a surrounding medallion, may be found in the Roman catacomb of "Cimitero Majore." The medallion of Christ Immanuel as we see it here dates from the 9th cent., inspired by a custom of the Byzantine imperial court. Empresses and other court dignitaries wore embroidered emblems of the emperor on their chest as signs of his supreme authority. The particular source that our iconographer used for this pattern is a famous Russian icon from the city of Yaroslavl now preserved in the Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow. It is variously called "The Virgin of the Sign of Yaroslavl" or "The Great Panaghia" (all holy). It was commissioned by Constantine the Wise for the cathedral in Yaroslavl sometime around the time of its dedication in 1215.

"Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name Him Immanuel." This icon is the visualization of this familiar passage from Isaiah chapter 7.

Gold leaf is used on her halo and that of Jesus to express unearthly light, the divine origin of sanctity. Greek letters are inscribed on the background "ICXC" is an abbreviation for Jesus Christ, *Iesous Khristos*. "MPOY" is an abbreviation for Mother of God, *Meter Theou*.

Jesus is presented to us as Christ Immanuel, portrayed as a youth rather than as a baby. His halo is inscribed with a cross and the Greek letter omicron, omega, nu, spelling "HO ON." In English, this becomes "Who Am," the name used for God in Exodus 3:14. His forehead is very broad, symbolic of great spiritual strength. He is wearing a cloak called in Greek a *himation*. The cloth is woven with gold thread, symbolic of His divine dignity and royalty. The embroidered yoke of His tunic is a Russian touch. Jesus is surrounded by a circle called a *mandorla*.

Mary wears a *homophorion*, or combined veil and mantle over her dress. The dress features nice Russian embroidered cuffs. The *homophorion* is adorned with three stars on the head and

shoulders. These are symbolic of Mary's perpetual virginity; before, during, and after her Son's birth. In 431 AD..., the Council of Ephesus officially declared that Mary is the *Theotokos*, or "God Bearer," she who provides the vital link between the divinity of God and humanity. Two angels carrying the Holy Eucharist marked with a cross complete the design: "Behold the Lamb of God! Behold Him who comes to take away the sins of the world!"

SYMBOLS OF CHRISTMAS

Christmas Tree

This past weekend at each of the CLOW the children worked on a project of a Christmas tree and heard about St. Boniface. What is this all about?

The story of the Christmas tree is part of the story of the life of St. Boniface, whose name was originally Winfrid. St. Boniface was born about the year 680 in Devonshire, England. At the age of five, he wanted to become a monk, and entered the monastery school near Exeter two years later. When he was fourteen, he entered the abbey of Nursling, in the Diocese of Winchester. Very studious himself, St. Boniface was the pupil of the learned abbot, Winbert. Later Boniface became the director of the school.

At this time, much of northern and central Europe still had not been evangelized. St. Boniface decided he wanted to be a missionary to these people. After one brief attempt, he sought the official approval of Pope St. Gregory II. The Pope charged him with preaching the gospel to the German people. (Also at this time, St. Boniface changed his name from Winfrid to Boniface.) St. Boniface travelled to Germany through the Alps into Bavaria and then into Hesse and Thuringia. In 722, the Pope consecrated St. Boniface as a bishop with jurisdiction over all of Germany. He knew that his greatest challenge was to eradicate pagan superstitions which hindered the acceptance of the gospel and the conversion of the people. Known as "the Apostle to Germany," he would continue to preach the gospel until he was martyred in 754. At this point we can begin our story about the Christmas tree.

With his band of faithful followers, St. Boniface was traveling through the woods along an old Roman road one Christmas Eve. Snow covered the ground, muffling their footsteps. Their breath could be seen in the crisp, cold air. Although several suggested that they camp for the night, St. Boniface encouraged them to push forward, saying, "Courage, brothers, and forward yet a little. God's moon will light us presently, and the path is plain. Well know I that you are weary; and my own heart wearies also for the home in England, where those I love so dearly are keeping feast this Christmas Eve. Oh, that I might escape from this wild, storm-tossed sea of Germany into the peaceful haven of my fatherland! But we have work to do before we feast tonight. For this is the Yule-tide, and the heathen people of the forest have gathered at the Oak of Geismar to worship their god, Thor; and strange things will be seen there, and deeds which make the soul black. But we are sent to lighten their darkness; and we will teach our kinsmen to keep a Christmas with us such as the woodland has never known. Forward, then, in God's name!"

They pushed ahead, reinvigorated by St. Boniface's plea. After a while, the road opened to a clearing. They could see houses, but dark and seemingly vacant. No human was in sight. Only the noise of hounds and horses broke the quiet. Continuing on, they came to a glade in the forest, and there appeared the sacred Thunder Oak of Geismar. "Here," St. Boniface

proclaimed as he held his bishop's crozier high with its cross on top, "here is the Thunder-oak; and here the cross of Christ shall break the hammer of the false god Thor."

In front of the tree was a huge bonfire. Sparks danced in the air. The townspeople surrounded the fire facing the sacred oak. St. Boniface interrupted their meeting, "Hail, sons of the forest! A stranger claims the warmth of your fire in the winter night." As St. Boniface and his companions approached the fire, the eyes of the townspeople were on these strangers. St. Boniface continued, "Your kinsman am I, of the German brotherhood and from Wessex, beyond the sea, have I come to bring you a greeting from that land, and a message from the All-Father, whose servant I am."

Hunrad, the old priest of Thor, welcomed St. Boniface and his companions. Hunrad then said to them, "Stand still, common man, and behold what the gods have called us hither to do! This night is the death-night of the sun-god, Baldur the Beautiful, beloved of gods and men. This night is the hour of darkness and the power of winter, of sacrifice and mighty fear. This night the great Thor, the god of thunder and war, to whom this oak is sacred, is grieved for the death of Baldur, and angry with this people because they have forsaken his worship. Long is it since an offering has been laid upon his altar, long since the roots of his holy tree have been fed with blood. Therefore its leaves have withered before the time, and its boughs are heavy with death. Therefore, the Slavs and the Saxons have beaten us in battle. Therefore, the harvests have failed, and the wolf-hordes have ravaged the folds, and the strength has departed from the bow, and the wood of the spear has broken, and the wild boar has slain the huntsman. Therefore, the plague has fallen on your dwellings, and the dead are more than the living in all your villages. Answer me, you people, are not these things true?" The people sounded their approval and then began a chant of praise to Thor.

When the last sounds faded, Hunrad pronounced, "None of these things will please the god. More costly is the offering that shall cleanse your sin, more precious the crimson dew that shall send new life into this holy tree of blood. Thor claims your dearest and your noblest gift." With that, Hunrad approached the children, grouped together around the fire. He selected the fairest boy, Asulf, the son of Duke Alvol and his wife, Thekla, and declared that he would be sacrificed to travel to Valhalla and bear the people's message to Thor. Asulf's parents were deeply shaken. Yet, no one spoke.

Hunrad led the boy to a large stone altar between the oak and the fire. He blindfolded the child, and had him kneel down placing his head on the stone altar. The people moved closer, and St. Boniface positioned himself near the priest. Hunrad then lifted his sacred black-stone hammer of the god Thor high into the air, ready to have it crush little Asulf's skull. As the hammer fell, St. Boniface thrust his crozier against the hammer, and it fell from Hunrad's hand, splitting in two against the stone altar. Sounds of awe and joy filled the air. Thekla ran to her child spared of this bloody sacrifice and embraced him tightly.

St. Boniface, his face radiant then spoke to the people, "Hearken, sons of the forest! No blood shall flow this night save that which pity has drawn from a mother's breast. For this is the birth-night of the white Christ, the Son of the All-Father, the Savior of mankind. Fairer is He than Baldur the Beautiful, greater than Odin the Wise, kinder than Freya the Good. Since He has come sacrifice is ended. The dark, Thor, on whom you have vainly called, is dead. Deep in the shades of Niffelheim he is lost forever. And now on this Christ-night you shall begin to live. This blood-tree shall darken your land no more. In the name of the Lord, I will destroy

it.” St. Boniface then took his broad ax and began striking the tree. A mighty wind suddenly arose and the tree fell, wrenching its roots from the earth and splitting into four pieces. Behind the mighty oak stood a young fir tree, pointing like a cathedral spire toward heaven. St. Boniface again spoke to the people, “This little tree, a young child of the forest, shall be your holy tree tonight. It is the wood of peace, for your houses are built of the fir. It is the sign of an endless life, for its leaves are ever green. See how it points upward to heaven. Let this be called the tree of the Christ-child; gather about it, not in the wild wood, but in your own homes; there it will shelter no deeds of blood, but loving gifts and rites of kindness.”

So they took the fir tree and carried it to the village. Duke Alvoild set the tree in the middle of his great hall. They placed candles on its branches, and it seemed filled with stars. Then St. Boniface, with Hunrad sitting at his feet, told the story of Bethlehem, the Baby Jesus in the manger, the shepherds, and the angels. All listened intently. Little Asulf, sitting on his mother’s lap, said, “Mother, listen now, for I hear those angels singing again behind the tree.” Some say it is true; some say it was St. Boniface’s companions singing, “All glory be to God on high, and to the earth be peace; goodwill, henceforth, from heaven to men begin and never cease.”

As we gather around our Christmas trees this year, may we give thanks for the gift of our faith, hold the story of our Savior’s birth in our hearts, and listen for the song of the angels.

Christmas Tree Blessing

Holy Creator of Trees, Bless with your abundant grace this our Christmas tree as a symbol of joy. May its evergreen branches be a sign of your never-fading promises. May its colorful lights and ornaments call us to decorate with love our home and our world. May the gifts that surround this tree be symbols of the gifts that we have received from the Tree of Christ’s Cross. Holy Christmas tree within our home, may Joy and Peace come and nest in your branches and in our hearts. Amen.

ADVENT REFLECTIONS

Monday 24 Dec 2 Sm. 7:1-5, 8-11 Lk. 1:67-79

God promised David that through his descendants his rule would last forever. For centuries, the promise was thought to be political. Then the throne of David was smashed. What of God’s promise? The early Christians rediscovered it at a deeper level – the descendant of David was Jesus, Lord forever, who arose to bring light and peace and freedom from ugliness. So He has, to all who accept His love and conform their hearts to His divine heart. The heart-changes we can see. The universality of His peace and freedom from wrong sometimes puzzles us, however. How can we find peace in our world?

First, we must experience the Lord’s gifts in ourselves. When we have made a birthplace for the Lord in our hearts and He is born within us, He brings His gifts with Him. Peace is ours, and mercy and light and inner freedom from every bondage. When these are ours, we begin to find them everywhere, hidden in the most unexpected situations – the tragedy that brings a woman to God, the pain that transmutes a man’s spirit in love. We see a world of peace because the Lord of peace is born in our heart forever!

PRAYER

Fourth Sunday of Advent

Bestir, O Lord, Thy might, we beseech Thee, and come; and with great power come to our aid, that, by the help of Thy grace, that which is hindered by our sins may be hastened by Thy merciful forgiveness. Who livest and reignest, with God the Father, in the unity of the Holy Ghost, God, world without end. Amen.

“God of love, as I come to the end of this Advent season, my heart is ready to celebrate the birth of Jesus. I join with Mary in saying, ‘Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.’ Nothing is impossible with you, O God.”

Christmas Eve Prayer

Loving God, Help us remember the birth of Jesus, that we may share in the song of the angels, the gladness of the shepherds, and worship of the wise men. Close the door of hate and open the door of love all over the world. Let kindness come with every gift and good desires with every greeting. Deliver us from evil by the blessing which Christ brings, and teach us to be merry with clear hearts. May the Christmas morning make us happy to be thy children, and Christmas evening bring us to our beds with grateful thoughts, forgiving and forgiven, for Jesus' sake. Amen.

UP-COMING SCHEDULE

Saturday 22 Dec Mass 8:30 a.m.
Confessions 1:30 p.m. – 4:30 p.m.
Vigil Mass for 4th Sunday of Advent

Sunday 23 Dec Masses 7:00 a.m., 8:30 a.m. 11:30 a.m. (Pvt. Baptism & Convalidation)
5:00 p.m. 7:00 p.m.

Monday 24 Dec Christmas Eve
Mass for Children 3:00 p.m.
Masses 6:00 p.m. 9:00 p.m. 12 Midnight

Tuesday 25 Dec Christmas Day
Mass at Dawn 7:30 a.m.
Mass of the Day 10:00 a.m.
Mass at Brig 7:30 p.m.

Wednesday 26 Dec 8:30 a.m. Mass

Thursday 27 Dec 8:30 a.m. Mass

Friday 28 Dec 8:30 a.m. Mass

Saturday 29 Dec 8:30 a.m. Mass
10:00 a.m. Pvt. Baptism
1:30 – 4:30 p.m. Confessions
Feast of the Holy Family Vigil Mass 5:00 p.m.

Sunday 30 Dec Feast of the Holy Family
Masses 7:00 a.m. 8:30 a.m. 11:30 a.m. 5:00 p.m. Brig 7:00 p.m.

Monday 31 Dec Tuesday 1 Jan

Solemnity of Mary the Mother of God Holy Day of Obligation

31 Dec Vigil Mass 5:00 p.m.

1 Jan Mass 10:00 a.m. Brig Mass 7:30 p.m.

Wednesday 2 Jan 6:30 a.m. Mass
7:00 – 8:30 a.m. Confessions
8:30 a.m. Mass
11:00 a.m. Mass Amazing Grays
2:00 p.m. Mass PCRS

Thursday 3 Jan 8:30 a.m. Mass
5:00 – 6:30 p.m. Confessions
6:30 p.m. Mass

Friday 4 Jan 8:30 a.m. Mass
6:30 p.m. KoC Night of Adoration
7:00 p.m. Mass Benediction

The greatest gift you will ever receive
will never be found under a Christmas tree.
It is far too valuable to be stored
in any other place but in the
depths of your heart.
- Anonymous

