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4th Sunday of Advent - 19 December 2021

Gerard Moore

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19 December 2021

Fourth Sunday of Advent

Reflection by Gerard Moore

Introduction

As the feast of Christmas looms, the readings for the final Sunday of Advent take us closer to the expectations of the one who is to come. There is a shift that allows us greater insight into the sense that Christ comes not from the great but from the more lowly, that God chooses differently to human society. With this is the understanding that Christ, the mighty ruler, brings peace not to rule by might.

This is strengthened with the narrative of the Visitation, where the two kinswomen Elizabeth and Mary, meet and exchange greetings and recognitions. Interestingly, this is the story of two strong women, each pivotal to salvation, carrying faith in strength and hope. They will be the teachers of Jesus and John, and they are our teachers.

Penitential Act

Use one of the *Roman Missal* texts or this optional litany form:

Lord Jesus, you came to do your Father's will.

Lord, have mercy.

You came as a little one but offered yourself for our salvation.

Christ, have mercy.

You will rule with majesty and power for all eternity.

Lord, have mercy.

Collect

*Pour forth, we beseech you, O Lord,
your grace into our hearts,
that we, to whom the Incarnation of Christ your Son
was made known by the message of an Angel,
may by his Passion and Cross
be brought to the glory of his Resurrection.*

Our opening prayer this Sunday is steeped in theology and piety. Theologically it recounts the salvific deeds of Christ: incarnation, passion and death, resurrection. It seeks that we be brought into the glory of Christ's resurrection through the crucifixion. The Advent focus is on the incarnation, with the reference to the message of the Angel offering an appreciation of the biblical narratives of the birth of

the child. The depths of the taking flesh are seen in the passion and cross, while the supremacy of grace over death comes forth in the resurrection.

The prayer, also the concluding collect for the thrice daily Angelus, evokes devotion to Mary. The Angelus reflects God's work of incarnation with a dialogue that rings with Mary's fiat and its outcome in the Word becoming flesh. The private message of Gabriel to Mary opens onto the public pronouncement of the angels to the shepherds, and ultimately made known to us.

The prayer can be difficult to proclaim precisely because it is so well known to many of the faithful. Yet it evinces that potent seasonal mixture of theology, piety, devotion to Mary and the Christ-child, and nativity stories. Most importantly, it closely connects the Cross to the incarnation, and sets them within the triumph of the resurrection.

First Reading

Micah 5:1- 4c

The ruler who is to come is first and foremost a bringer of peace.

Responsorial Psalm

Psalm 80:2-3, 15-16, 18-19

Lord, make us turn to you; let us see your face and we shall be saved.

As with the reading from Micah, there is great hope that the Lord will come.

Second Reading

Hebrews 10:5-10

Our passage from Hebrews continues to prepare us for the coming of the divine as fully human.

Gospel Reading

Luke 1:39 - 45

As these two strong kinswomen meet, with Elizabeth greeting Mary, the salvation of all creation is brought before us.

Reflection

The readings for this final Sunday in Advent move us towards an understanding of the Christ who is coming. The reading from the prophet Micah offers some new notes and brings forth themes that will be taken up in the Visitation, our Gospel text.

As with the extracts from the prophets over the last few weeks, the underlying theme is the emergence of a new leader, something of a 'strongman', to take up the reins of the nation and to rule under the reign of God. Further features are revealed here. The coming one is from humble leadership stock. The leading clans are not able to bring forth such a true leader. However though coming from the lowly ranked tribal group, the emergent ruler has a lineage that is ancient, and so has integrity born from the most original faith in God. There is a connection being drawn between the lowly, the humble and the true.

The ultimate result is not national riches, defeat of enemies or empire, but peace. The ruler brings peace.

There is another point that can be made here, and though obvious is absolutely key to Christian faith. Micah speaks of the ruler born of a woman, a point made forcefully in the Gospel. The feast of Christmas is the feast of the incarnation, of the coming of the divine amidst creation as truly flesh as truly divine. Micah's down to earth statement presages the pivotal point of the revelation of the depth of God's love.

Regarding the second reading, there are three features of this extract from the Letter to the Hebrews that enrich our Advent theology. The passage begins with a modified verse from the Ps 40. The striking phrase is that God has prepared a 'body' for the Christ. While there are a range of ideas at play in that verse, this is the one that ties the reading to our preparation for the feast of Christmas.

With this comes the reference to the obedience of Christ. There are a pair of themes here. Foremost is the obedience of Christ, who takes flesh for our salvation. This is a strong message in the Letters of Paul and is echoed here as well. But, given the context and the Gospel that will follow, there is too an intimation of the obedience of Mary. It is Mary's *fiat* that enables the Christ child to be born, and her obedience is integral to the incarnation. Mary the Mother of the saviour and Mary the faithful believer, are one.

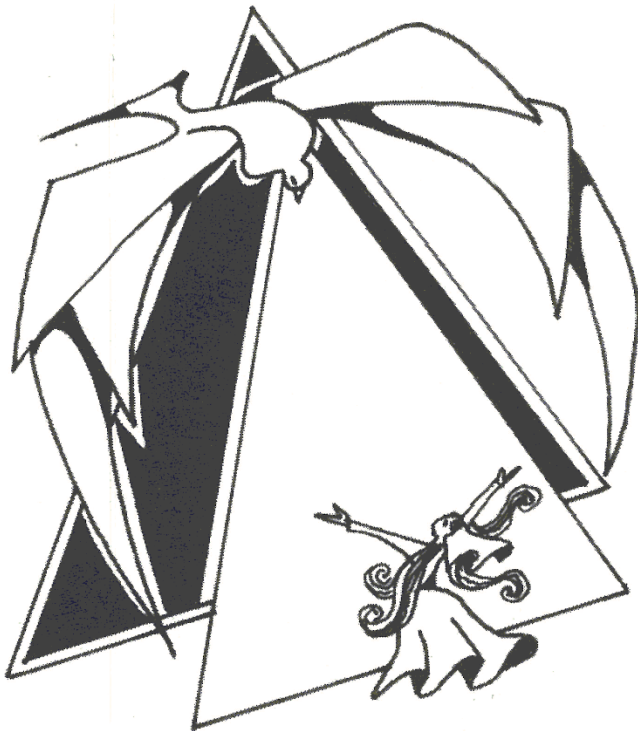
The third point is a subtle shift in the text itself, testament to the theological view of the author. We have before us the line "the offering of the body of Jesus Christ ..." I am leaving aside the language of sacrifice and offering what are central to Hebrews and turning our concentration to the appellation Jesus Christ. Our author rarely joins these two names so closely, yet here places 'Jesus' the earthly one and 'Christ' the divine signification together. The writer is highlighting the integrity and absolute unity of the incarnation. We are quite used to this after 2000 years, but here there is a particular effort to ensure there is no loss of the full sense of the incarnation, an important contribution to our preparation for the feast of the incoming of the light.

Our Gospel passage is the narrative of the visitation of Mary to Elizabeth. Let's not forget as we take up the Advent interpretation of this text that it is a profound encounter between two strong women. The readings from the prophets across the season have focused on the coming male leader, the ideal king of justice, of peace, of the reign of God. Here the final advent reading features two strong women, both poor, both bearing children of enormous significance, both supportive one of the other, both willing and able to read and enact the will of God.

It might be best interpreting both as prophets, as tellers of the will of God. Mary has conceived by the Spirit, Elizabeth too is filled with the Holy Spirit. As the elder cousin reveals Mary's pregnancy, she does so in the language of the beatitudes, the language of Jesus most famous preaching. She also allows that her child will give way to Mary's child, not just in respect but in full joy.

With all this there is a theological profundity as the meaning of the incarnation is explored. The coming of the divine to take flesh is a cooperative venture, and Elizabeth praises her younger kin for her faith. The faith of the young woman is inseparable from the salvation of all creation in Christ. She is the 'mother' of 'my Lord'. These two women are the teachers of Jesus and the Baptist: are they our teachers too?

The divine inbreaking is a cooperative event. The Spirit is present, but so too is the will and willingness of these two individual women, prophets who wring in the reign of God. Perhaps there is something systemic that the church could learn from this.



*Mary was found to be
with child through the
Holy Spirit.*

Prayer of the Faithful

Introduction

As we move to celebrate the great event of Jesus' birth let us bring to our Father the needs of our Church and the needs of our community.

Petitions

We pray for the leaders of our Church, especially Pope Francis, that they will continue to work in humility for the coming of the Kingdom as we all journey towards the Synod 2023.

(Pause) Lord hear us OR We pray to the Lord.

We pray for the leaders of countries worldwide that they will respect the needs of Christians to celebrate this glorious feast.

(Pause) Lord hear us OR We pray to the Lord.

We pray for people throughout the world who suffer illness and grief because of the pandemic. May world leaders ensure that there is equitable distribution of vaccines and necessary medicines.

(Pause) Lord hear us OR We pray to the Lord.

We pray for all those who work in the retail trade and in the hospitality industry that they will be able to contemplate the real meaning of the Christmas season in a way that brings them peace.

(Pause) Lord hear us OR We pray to the Lord.

We pray for those affected by domestic violence at this time of the year. May they find places of safety and protection and may the perpetrators seek to remove the source of their violence.

(Pause) Lord hear us OR We pray to the Lord.

We pray for those who deeply mourn at this special time of the year loved ones who have died. May they have peace in knowing that those grieve for are with God.

(Pause) Lord hear us OR We pray to the Lord.

Conclusion

Father, we bring these needs to you knowing that you hear our prayers that we make through the power of the Spirit and in the name of Jesus our Lord.

Amen.

Music selections by Alessio Loiacono and Chris deSilva

GA

Let all mortal flesh keep silence. Liturgy of St James/ French Carol Melody. 190

My soul in stillness waits. M. Haugen. 280

O come, O come Emmanuel. J. M. Neale et. al./ Gregorian Chant Melody. 285

AOV1

O come, O come Emmanuel. J. M. Neale et. al./ Gregorian Chant Melody. 174.

O holy Mary. O. Alstott. 141

AOV2

Open the heavens. B. Boniwell. 163

AOV4Kids

Christmas is coming. J. Bell. 55 (Verse 4)

Like Mary. G. Holmes. 53

O Emmanuel. M. Mangan. 52

AOVNG

Among all. Chris de Silva. 8

CWB

Holy Virgin, by God's decree. Jean-Paul Lécot, tr. W. R. Lawrence. 714

Now sing my soul, 'How great the Lord'. Michael Seward. 754

The angel Gabriel from Heaven came. Sabine Baring-Gould. 815

CWBII

Sunday by Sunday hymn suggestions

O come, O come, Emmanuel. Tr. John Mason Neale *et al.* 242

Open the heavens, Lord. Brian Boniwell. 243

Saviour of the nations, come. Martin Luther, tr. William Reynolds/Martin L. Seltz. 246

The coming of our Lord. Charles Coffin, Tr. Anthony G. Petti/John Chandler. 248

You heavens, sprinkle dew from above/*Rorate caeli*. Adapt. Rev. Percy Jones. 254

Holy Virgin, by God's decree. Jean-Paul Lécot, tr. W. R. Lawrence. 410

Immaculate Mary, we praise God in you. Brian Foley. 416

Additional selections by Chris deSilva

Come to set us free. Bernadette Farrell. 233

Gentle Virgin Mother. Paraphr. Anthony G. Petti. 407

Lift up your hearts. Robert F. O'Connor SJ. 539

S&S2

Hail Mary: gentle woman. Carey Landry. 336

Psalms Selected by Chris deSilva and Angela McCarthy

Psalm 79: *Lord, make us turn to you; let us see your face and we shall be saved.*

Psalm 79: Kathleen Boschetti MSC. CWB 173

Psalm 80: Lord, make us turn to you: Kathleen Boschetti. GA 47

Psalm 80 (79): Jenny O'Brien. JOBC pg. 13

Lord, make us turn to you. LPC Marty Haugen. P.14

Music selections by Michael Mangan

O Emmanuel (TT/SYJ/CWB II) [Gathering, Communion, Recessional]

Come, Lord Jesus, come *CH & V4* (SYJ/ CWBII) [Lighting Advent Wreath]

Mary Said Yes (TT) [CHILDREN: Gathering, Recessional]

We come, we come (TWB) [Communion – esp V3]

One body in Christ (TWB) [Communion – esp V2]

Waiting for the child (TT/SYJ) [Non-Scriptural Reflection - Gifts]

