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Fourth Sunday of Advent - 22 December 2024

Gerard Moore

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22 December 2024

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 and does 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, justice 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.

Collect commentary by Gerard Moore: The discussion of the collect, slightly adapted, was composed by me for the Canadian liturgical journal Celebrate! (Novalis Press). My thanks to them for permission to reuse the material.

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, the salvation of 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 it is obvious, it 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 and 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 Psalm 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 us 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 of each other, both willing and able to read and enact the will of God.

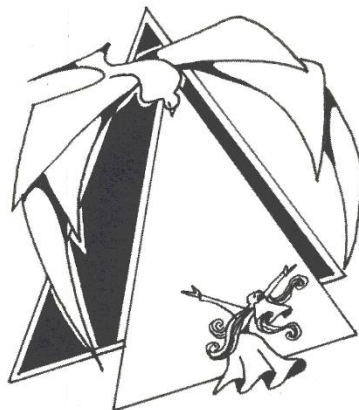
It might be best interpreting both as prophets, as tellers of the will of God. Mary has conceived by the Spirit, Elizabeth too is filled with the Holy Spirit. As the elder cousin reveals Mary's pregnancy, she does so in the language of the beatitudes, the language of Jesus most famous preaching. She 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'.

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

On the ground in Bethlehem this Christmas

Over these weeks of Advent, I have brought into the discussion the violence in the Middle East. We can consider that there will be little or no Christmas celebration in Bethlehem this year. The Christian Palestinian population is exhausted by war and terror. This year, as was for last year, there will be little to celebrate by a distressed and weary people, Christian and Muslim alike.



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

Prayer of the Faithful

Introduction

God has loved humankind from the dawn of creation and so we know that our needs will be met through divine grace. Let us offer our petitions in humility and faith.

Petitions

We pray for Pope Francis and all the leaders of the Church. May they fearlessly lift up their voices as prophets of peace.

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

We pray for those who are leaders in war-torn parts of the world, particularly in the Middle East. May the Spirit break their hearts of stone and enable them to find peaceful ways of living together.

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

We pray for people who cannot be with family and loved ones in the Christmas season. May our prayers support them in their need for love and security.

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

We pray for all those who will be travelling on the roads in the coming days and weeks. May they be vigilant, respectful and careful.

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

We pray for all those who work in emergency services during the holiday season. May they be treated with respect as they offer professional help where it is needed.

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

We pray for our community. For those who mourn and for those who are ill, that we will help generously where needed to bring the light of Christ to them.

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

Conclusion

God of justice and peace, we offer you these needs and those that are still quietly in our hearts in the faith that they will be answered in Jesus' name and through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Amen.

Music selections by Alessio Loiacono and Chris deSilva

Fourth Sunday of Advent, Year C (22 December 2024)

Title	AOV	AOV2	AOVK	CWB	CWBII	GA
Christmas is coming			55			
Come to set us free					233	
Gentle Virgin Mother					407	
Hail Mary: gentle woman						544
Holy Virgin, by God's decree				714	410	
Immaculate Mary, we praise God in you				723	416	549
Let all mortal flesh keep silence					533	190
Lift up your hearts					539	416
Like Mary			53			
My soul in stillness waits						280
Now sing my soul, 'How great the Lord'				754		
O come, O come Emmanuel	174			763	242	285
O Emmanuel			52			
O holy Mary	141					
Open the heavens		163			243	
Saviour of the nations, come					246	
The angel Gabriel from Heaven came				815	247	
The coming of our Lord				816	248	
You heavens, sprinkle dew from above/ <i>Rorate caeli</i>					254	

Title	AOVNG	S&S2
Among all	8	
Hail Mary: gentle woman		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.*

	CWB	GA	JOBC	LPC
Psalm 79	173	47	pg. 13	pg. 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]