

ADVENT

Approaching the Dawn as Pilgrims of Hope



Rejoice in the Lord always;
again I say, rejoice.
Indeed, the Lord is near.
(Phil 4:4-5)

Leader's Guide

LECTIO DIVINA

Parish Program - Praying with the gospels through Advent



**Pathways
to the Future**

“Scripture establishes us in goodness and reminds us who we truly are: children of God, saved and beloved... Sacred Scripture releases a paralysed faith and makes us savour anew the Christian life for what it truly is: a love story with the Lord.”

Pope Francis Word of God Sunday, 2024

Welcome

Welcome to our Lectio Divina program for parishes. This program will provide an opportunity for people to gather together to pray, share and reflect on the Sunday gospel readings during the 4 weeks of Advent.

Advent is a holy season which the Church has given to us so that we can make appropriate preparation for the celebration of Christmas. It is a time when we are reminded that we are pilgrims on a journey, a journey of hope towards the dawn, towards the light of Christ come in the world. It is a beautiful time because it is full of joyful expectation and an anticipation of what is to come.

This Advent also marks a time of preparation for the beginning of the Jubilee year which will begin on Christmas Eve 2024, when the Holy Father, Pope Francis, opens the Holy Door in St Peter's Basilica. We are invited to reflect on our call as pilgrims of hope and to allow the Holy Spirit to awaken and stir within us a renewed appreciation of the gift of our faith and a reminder of our call to spread the message of peace and joy throughout the earth.

There is also a penitential element to the season of Advent, but for many people it is not as demanding as Lent. Perhaps this is appropriate because Lent is all about getting ready for the greatest event in the Church's calendar, Easter. Christmas would mean nothing without Easter where death is conquered and eternal life through sharing in Christ's Resurrection is assured. Jesus was born to die and rise again.

Advent is very much caught up in the concept of waiting for a happy event. It can be similar to the preparations that are made when a new baby is due to arrive into a family. For this reason it is a time of joyful activity and expectancy. This sense of expectancy is reflected in the readings we find in the Mass in the weeks preceding Christmas. "A feeling of expectancy had grown among the people, who were beginning to think that John might be the Christ, so John declared before them all, 'I baptise you with water, but someone is coming, someone who is more powerful than I am, and I am not fit to undo the strap of his sandals; He will baptise with the Holy Spirit and fire.' Luke 3:16 (3rd Sunday of Advent)

When a child is expected or born, there can be great speculation as to what they will become. How will they make their way in the world? What impact will they have on the world? When Jesus was born the answers to these questions were provided in Scripture by the prophets, particularly Isaiah. This child would be the fulfilment of those Scriptures and the preparations we make at Advent serve to remind us of that.

We all know that Advent clashes with the frantic secular activity which runs concurrently with the holy season and for many people contemplation of what we are about to celebrate comes a very poor second in their list of priorities. This is a sad fact, and it is unfortunate that people are not more in tune with what is often referred to as, "the real meaning of Christmas". A phrase which has sadly become a euphemism.

A deeper knowledge and involvement would very likely help reduce the stress of the pre- Christmas rush. It would create a much-needed space to stop and simply think, "God is with us." He came to live among us by being born into His creation. He has promised to be with us in every aspect of our lives if we let him and He will come again to call us to eternal life.

This resource is designed to facilitate the contemplation of that great event and all that He promises us in the Incarnation. It provides us with the opportunity to make some space so that we can come to a greater awareness of the promises of Christ which were first made manifest through his long anticipated birth. Through shared and individual study, we hope that you will grow in the love and knowledge of God's love and all that he has done for us and all he continually wants to do for us.

Aishling & Fr Paul

Pathways to the Future Team

Pope Francis invites us to recite the following prayer as we prepare to enter into the Jubilee Year (2025) as Pilgrims of Hope.

The Jubilee Prayer

Father in heaven,
may the faith you have given us
in your son, Jesus Christ, our brother,
and the flame of charity enkindled
in our hearts by the Holy Spirit,
reawaken in us the blessed hope
for the coming of your Kingdom.

May your grace transform us
into tireless cultivators of the seeds of the Gospel.
May those seeds transform from within both humanity and the whole cosmos
in the sure expectation
of a new heaven and a new earth,
when, with the powers of Evil vanquished,
your glory will shine eternally.

May the grace of the Jubilee
reawaken in us, Pilgrims of Hope,
a yearning for the treasures of heaven.

May that same grace spread
the joy and peace of our Redeemer
throughout the earth.

To you our God, eternally blessed,
be glory and praise for ever.

Amen

His Holiness, Pope Francis.

www.iubilaeum2025.va

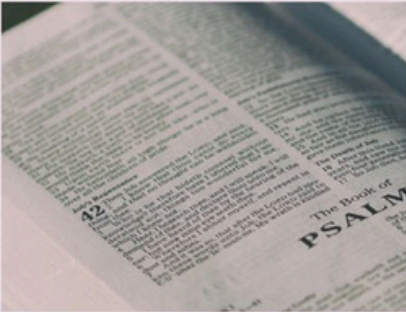
The 4 steps/movements of *Lectio Divina*



(1) LECTIO (Read)

An attentive, slow, repetitious recitation of a short passage of Scripture

Familiarise yourself with the passage from Scripture. Take your time and slowly read through the passage. Read through the passage again slowly paying attention to any words, or phrases that particularly speak to you.



(2) MEDITATIO (Meditate)

Understanding the passage in the context of my own life

Select the phrase or word that stands out to you and ask yourself; what is God saying to me?

How might this word or phrase relate to me in my life today?

Meditate on this piece of text; ask God as you pray with this piece of scripture to open your heart to what he would like to say to you.



(3) ORATIO: (Pray)

Conversing with God

After you have prayed with the Scripture you are encouraged to talk to God, in your own words, to share with Him everything that comes to your mind.

Offer a prayer to God that connects with the insights that have to come to you in the passage.



(4) CONTEMPLATIO (Contemplate)

Reflecting in God's presence

Take a moment to rest in the presence of God.

Allow the message of the Scripture you have just read to sink in.

Allow yourself to be absorbed in the words of the passage and allow the Holy Spirit to draw you into His presence through the Scripture so that your heart and mind are enlightened.

Introduction to Lectio Divina



Lectio Divina is Latin for, “Divine Reading.”

The ancient Christian practice of Lectio Divina allows the Word of God to take root in our hearts and give direction to our life. Lectio Divina enables us to contemplate the Word of God in a deep and meaningful way. By working through the recommended four movements of Lectio Divina, we allow ourselves to be guided towards a deeper understanding of God’s Word where we can enter into a contemplative form of prayer that seeks to nourish, feed and enlighten our hearts and minds by meditating and reflecting on Scripture.

Lectio Divina is a great blessing for the entire Church as it opens up the rich truths of Scripture for every Christian. We are continually encouraged to engage regularly in the practice of Lectio Divina so we can allow ourselves to meet our Lord as we read his Word and allow him to transform our lives to be more like him through the work of the Holy Spirit.

In essence, Lectio Divina is a simple way to meet with the Lord through reflection and prayer, based on Holy Scripture. It is not a study method. Background knowledge can be helpful, but is not essential. Used in groups a structure is necessary, but for individuals, the steps need not be followed rigidly. Our aim is meeting God, not just completing the steps themselves. So when the Lord impresses something on us we need to stop and wait. We can always come back to the steps another time. We don’t want to lose what God is saying to us.

Visualising the events through Visio Divina, “Divine Seeing.”

We live in a visual age. Modern communication and social media take up a very significant part of our lives. We can be bombarded with a huge variety of imagery and messages on a daily basis and there are times when we can feel overwhelmed. Advent is designed to help us to stop and listen to God and make preparation for the celebration of how His Beloved Son came into His creation to guide us to His kingdom. In making space to think and pray about this great high point in God’s plan for our salvation, we have also included a selection of sacred art. Visualising the events taking place is a wonderful way of allowing ourselves to be drawn into the truths about God and the message He wants to speak into our lives.

This Lectio Divina parish program is an opportunity for parish groups to contemplate the image, read the Word of God, have a space to share thoughts and insights and to discern during moments of prayerful silence, the direction in which the Holy Spirit is moving within us as we strive to deepen our relationship with Christ.

Gospel Passages for the 4 Sundays of Advent
YEAR C - The Year of Luke

Sunday 1st December

1st Sunday of Advent

Luke 21:25-28, 34-36

That day will be sprung on you suddenly, like a trap.

Sunday 8th December

2nd Sunday of Advent

Luke 3:1-6

The Call of John the Baptist

Sunday 15th December

3rd Sunday of Advent

Luke 3:10-18

Someone is coming who will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and Fire.

Sunday 22nd December

4th Sunday of Advent

Luke 1:39-45

Why should I be honoured with a visit from the mother of my Lord?



Overall structure of the program.

5 mins

Welcome & Introduction

Set up a prayer space which can include a Bible, candle and an icon or cross.

Welcome everyone!

Invite participants to briefly introduce themselves. Indicate to participants the length of the session. (1 hour)

Invite participants to share their hopes for the program.

5 mins

Connecting Question

A suggested opening question and prayer is available at the beginning of each session.

This will encourage conversation and help participants to connect with one another.

Set the context of your session just before you begin. This is provided in the booklet

10 mins

Visio Divina

Encourage people to gaze at the image in their booklet/projected on the screen.

Allow their eye to be drawn to specific elements.

Speak through the various elements of the art as scripted for each session.

Allow for a time of silence and contemplation of the image.

Invite people to share what struck them from the image.

30 mins

Lectio Divina of the Gospel passage

Invite people to be comfortable, perhaps close their eyes or follow the text in front of them.

Read the passage twice. Consider having two voices.

Guide participants through the 4 movements of Lectio Divina.

10 mins

Takeaway from the session

After you have finished your time of reading, meditation, prayer and contemplation, invite participants to share any experiences or thoughts that particularly impressed upon them during the session.

Close the session using the Jubilee prayer at the front of the booklet.

Group leader's preparation for session 1 - First Sunday of Advent

Gospel Reading: Luke 21:25-28, 34-36

1. Take time to read and reflect on the image.
2. Pray with the Gospel passage during your personal prayer time
3. Take time to read and reflect on the homily by Pope Francis.

Opening Question: Advent is a time of preparation and anticipation as we look forward to celebrating the birth of Jesus. However, the hustle and bustle of preparations for Christmas can often be distracting. What are your hopes for joining the program this Advent?

Opening Prayer

Heavenly Father, as we begin our journey this Advent, we ask that our time together in prayer and reflection will help us to prepare to receive the child Jesus into our hearts this Christmas. May we be attentive to the words of Jesus to be watchful, to keep alert and to recognise His presence in our lives. We ask this through Christ, Our Lord. Amen.

Setting the context

Jesus gives us a stark warning that we need to be alert and ready for his return. Through human history there has always been great speculation about, "The Second Coming", or the end of the world. We are in the world but are advised to not be part of it. We are to live our lives as if we were to meet Jesus at any time. This could be at the end of the world or the end of our lives. Jesus puts before us a menacing and even horrific scene when he talks of such chaos and upheaval in all of nature that will cause some to die of fear. Such scenes have been played out on film and TV screens, but although we can find them scary and upsetting, we seldom move on to the possibility that they may actually happen. It seems that Jesus is telling us that they really could. However, we don't know when.

This may sound daunting, but we are simply being called to discipleship. If we live as a witness to Christ every day of our lives his return will be a cause for rejoicing rather than fear. We may be aware of our failings or sinfulness, but we will also be aware of a loving, merciful God. We are asked to pray all the time. This does not necessarily mean that we are to spend all our time on our knees, rather that we bring God into every aspect of our lives.

As Christians we are called to holiness. Again, many people find this daunting but perhaps Jesus is asking us to rise to what could perhaps be better defined as a challenge. Living the Christian life in today's world will present us with challenges every day and in many diverse ways. It is a life of love and service and although we may fail at times, with perseverance, determination and faith we will also succeed. God's grace will inevitably bear fruit in us, and part of that success will be the ability to resist or deal with the coarseness, debauchery, drunkenness, and cares of life and stand before the Lord with confidence when are called to do so.



Background to the painting.

The Light of the World (1851–1854), was painted by the English artist William Holman Hunt. It represents the figure of Jesus preparing to knock on an overgrown and long-unopened door, illustrating Revelation 3:20: "Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me."

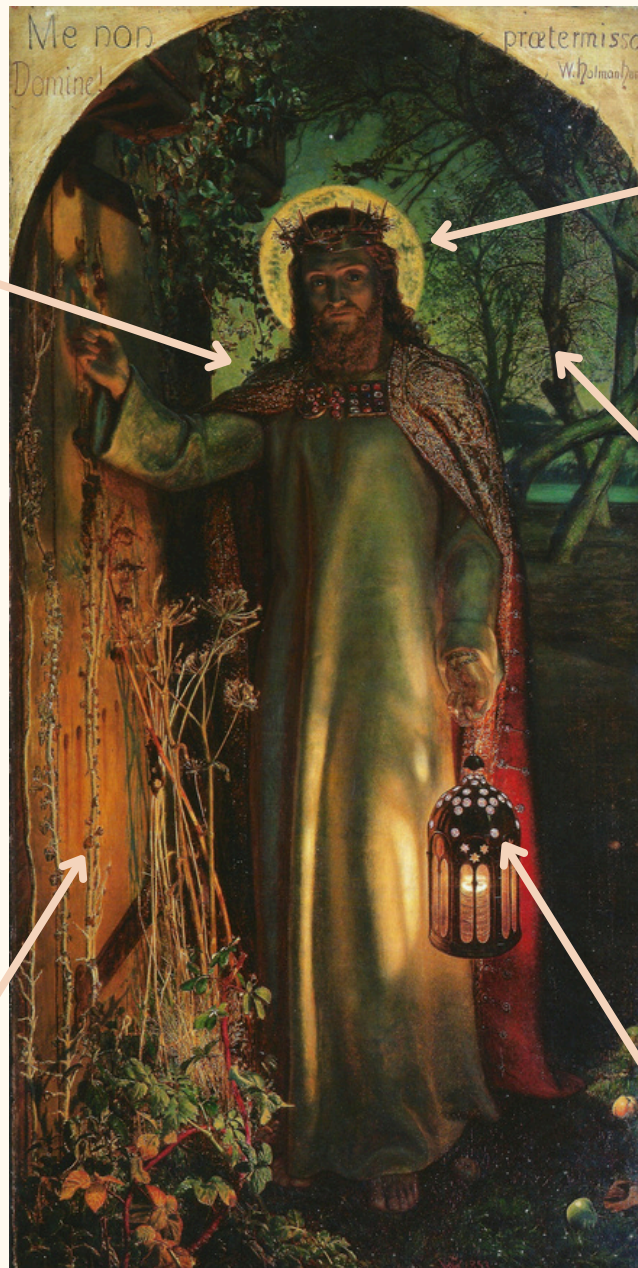
Following the reading of the script, invite participants to share what struck them from the painting.

(1)

In this painting by William Hunt, we are drawn to the figure of Christ who prepares to knock on an overgrown and long unopened door. Notice Christ's posture; his gaze, his expression. He is inviting us to respond. He invites us into the scene.

(4)

Let your gaze rest on the door. In Sacred Scripture, doors often represent acceptance or rejection. This door, surrounded by overgrown foliage and barely visible, is sought out by Christ. Raising His hand to knock, He awaits our response. He makes His presence known. And yet, there is no handle on this door. It can only be opened from the inside.



The Light of the World - By William Holman Hunt (1851-1852)

(3)

See the light around Christ's head. We are reminded that Jesus is the light of salvation. We can recall the words of St John's gospel, 'The light has come into the world.' (John 3:19) Christ comes to seek us out, to invite us into the light. To open our hearts and our homes to the light of His presence.

(5)

The wilderness in the background and the faint hue of light points to the coming of the dawn which begins to emerge against the backdrop of the barren trees and solitary landscape. We are reminded that the world can never offer what Christ is offering: new life, hope and salvation.

(2)

Notice also the lantern. Christ has travelled a weary distance, with lamp in hand, ready to knock. The lamp, represents the light of our conscience. A conscience that is either dulled or shining brightly. It evokes the question of whether we are prepared and ready to hear Christ's knock on the door to our hearts.

Gospel
Luke 21:25-28,34-36

That day will be sprung on you suddenly, like a trap

Jesus said to his disciples: 'There will be signs in the sun and moon and stars; on earth nations in agony, bewildered by the clamour of the ocean and its waves; men dying of fear as they await what menaces the world, for the powers of heaven will be shaken. And then they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory. When these things begin to take place, stand erect, hold your heads high, because your liberation is near at hand.

'Watch yourselves, or your hearts will be coarsened with debauchery and drunkenness and the cares of life, and that day will be sprung on you suddenly, like a trap. For it will come down on every living man on the face of the earth. Stay awake, praying at all times for the strength to survive all that is going to happen, and to stand with confidence before the Son of Man.' (JB)

Prompts for Lectio Divina.

- What feelings does this piece of scripture invoke in you?
- What word or phrase stands out for you? Why?
- Hold on to it for a moment and then take it to the Lord in prayer.
- Remember to keep in mind the thought, "Be still and know that I am God."
- Bring to the Lord your feelings, even those you may perceive to be negative.
- In verse 26, Jesus describes people fainting from fear and foreboding. How do you tend to respond with uncertainty or fear? How can your faith help you face fear with a sense of peace and trust?



Homily - Pope Francis
First Sunday of Advent - Gospel Reading: Luke 21:25-28, 34-36

The Gospel of today's liturgy, the First Sunday of Advent, speaks to us about the Lord's coming at the end of time. Jesus announces bleak and distressing events, but precisely at this point He invites us not to be afraid. Why? Because everything will be okay? No, but because He will come. Jesus will return as He promised. This is what he says: "Stand erect and raise your heads because your redemption is at hand" (Lk 21:28). It is nice to hear this encouraging Word: stand up straight and raise our heads because right during those moments when everything seems to be coming to an end, the Lord comes to save us. We await Him with joy, even in the midst of tribulations, during life's crises and the dramatic events of history. We await Him.

But how do we raise our heads and not become absorbed with difficulties, suffering and defeat? Jesus points the way with a strong reminder: "Beware that your hearts do not become drowsy... Be vigilant at all times and pray" (Lk 21:34, 36).

"Be vigilant": vigilance. Let us focus on this important aspect of the Christian life. From the words of Christ, we see that vigilance is tied to alertness: be alert, do not get distracted, that is, stay awake! Vigilance means this: not to allow our hearts to become lazy or our spiritual life to soften into mediocrity. Be careful because we can become "sleepy Christians" – and we know there are many Christians who are asleep, who are anesthetized by spiritual worldliness – Christians without spiritual fervor, without intensity in prayer, without enthusiasm for mission, without passion for the Gospel; Christians who always look inwards, incapable of looking to the horizon. And this leads to "dozing off": to move things along by inertia, to fall into apathy, indifferent to everything except what is comfortable for us. This is a sad life going forward this way since there is no happiness.

We need to be vigilant so that our daily life does not become routine, and, as Jesus says, so we are not burdened by life's anxieties (cf. v. 34). So today is a good moment to ask ourselves: what weighs on my heart? What weighs on my spirit? What makes me go to sit in the lazy chair? It is sad to see Christians "in the armchair"! What are the mediocrities that paralyze me, the vices that crush me to the ground and prevent me from raising my head? And regarding the burdens that weigh on the shoulders of our brothers and sisters, am I aware of them or indifferent to them? These are good questions to ask ourselves, because they help guard our hearts against apathy. What then is apathy? It is a great enemy of the spiritual life and also of Christian life. Apathy is a type of laziness that makes us slide into sadness, it takes away zest for life and the will to do things. It is a negative spirit that traps the soul in apathy, robbing it of its joy. It starts with sadness sliding downwards so that there is no joy. The Book of Proverbs says: "With all vigilance guard your heart, for in it are the sources of life" (Prov 4:23). Guard your heart: that means to be vigilant! Stay awake and guard your heart.

And let us add an essential ingredient: the secret to being vigilant is prayer. In fact, Jesus says: "Be vigilant at all times and pray" (Lk 21:36). Prayer is what keeps the lamp of the heart lit. This is especially true when we feel that our enthusiasm has cooled down. Prayer re-lights it, because it brings us back to God, to the centre of things. Prayer reawakens the soul from sleep and focuses it on what matters, on the purpose of existence. Even during our busiest days, we must not neglect prayer. The prayer of the heart can be helpful for us, repeating often brief invocations. For example, during Advent, we could make a habit of saying, "Come, Lord Jesus." Only these words, but repeating them: "Come, Lord Jesus". This time of preparation leading to Christmas is beautiful: we think of the nativity scene and Christmas, so let us say from the heart: "Come, Lord Jesus". Let us repeat this prayer all throughout the day: the soul will remain vigilant! "Come, Lord Jesus", is a prayer we can all say together three times. "Come, Lord Jesus", "Come, Lord Jesus", "Come, Lord Jesus".

ANGELUS

Saint Peter's Square

Sunday, 28 November 2021

Group leader's preparation for session 2 - Second Sunday of Advent

Gospel Reading: Luke 3:1-6

1. Take time to read and reflect on the image.
2. Pray with the Gospel passage during your personal prayer time
3. Take time to read and reflect on the homily by Pope Francis.

Opening Question: Each day we are called to conversion, to turn our lives around. Jesus offers us a path on which to follow him, and continually invites us to unite ourselves with the plan he has for our lives. This takes courage and it also means recognising and turning away from those things that distract us from our relationship with Him. What things do you need to set aside this Advent to help your relationship grow deeper with Jesus?

Opening Prayer:

Heavenly Father, you call each of us by name. You chose John the Baptist to prepare a way for your only begotten Son, Jesus Christ. Give us the courage and insight to hear your personal call so that we too can take the path of goodness and righteousness. Help us to have the courage, like John the Baptist, to never be afraid to witness to our faith. May this Advent be an opportunity to bring Christ and his message of love and peace into our homes, family life and wider parish community. Amen.

Setting the context

It has to be admitted that we now live in a secular world, an ongoing trend with no real sign of abating any time soon. In parish conversations we often refer back to the "Good Old Days," of filled churches, predominant Christian attitudes and ethos and of course Catholic Ireland, "the land of saints and scholars". Patterns and trends have changed dramatically in a fairly short space of time. However, it is important to be reminded that God is still in control. He has not left his Church in any part of the world, but in this part of the world He is letting it be purified and it is a very necessary purification. We may be "fewer but truer" as Pope Benedict said but that can be a call to faith and discipleship rather than a cause for despondency.

We are called to be John the Baptist type disciples in our parishes and even in our homes and families where some of those we love and cherish no longer practice. Living out the Advent message in our own lives can be an example and witness to others. It may require the patience of a saint, or a particular saint like John. People came to John not just to be baptised but to hear what he had to say. We are told even the despotic, corrupt and cruel Herod liked to listen to John.

Let us use our Advent to ask God to provide for us and help us to be an Advent to those we meet whether they be family, friends or strangers. Remember, the word Advent comes from, "ad-venire" in Latin or "to come to". Pope Francis reminds of what Advent calls us to; "Advent invites us to a commitment to vigilance, looking beyond ourselves, expanding our mind and heart in order to open ourselves up to the needs of people, of brothers and sisters, and to the desire for a new world." (Pope Francis, Angelus 2018)

Background to the painting.

Christ in the House of His Parents (1849–50) was painted by John Everett Millais. It illustrates the Holy Family in Saint Joseph's carpentry workshop. It depicts the young Jesus helping His father Joseph. John the Baptist, the cousin of Jesus, is featured carrying a bowl of water signifying the great role he would have in preparing the way for Christ.

Following the reading of the script, invite participants to share what struck them from the painting.

1

When we first look at this painting it is a busy scene and one which takes place in St Joseph's carpentry workshop. Each figure holds great significance in the life of Jesus. God's plan for our salvation, in and through the person of Jesus, unfolds within the Holy family who are each captured in this image.

6

In the background you will see a ladder on which sits a dove. We are reminded of Jacob in the Old Testament. During a time of trial, as Jacob fled from his brother Esau, he dreamt of a ladder that reached from earth to heaven. When he awoke he had a great sense of God's presence and plan for His life. In the New Testament, Jesus is the perfect ladder, the bridge between heaven and earth.

4

Clasping the hand of Jesus, as he is being comforted, is St Joseph, the foster father of Jesus. Observe the concerned, yet serene expression on his face. He fulfils his role as Jesus' earthly father forming and instructing Jesus in His growing up years.



Christ in the House of His Parents, John Everett Millais (1849-1850)

3

Notice the elderly woman to the left standing behind the table. It is Anne, the mother of Mary and grandmother of Jesus. She removes the nail from Jesus' finger using a pair of pincers. The concern for her grandchild is etched on her face.

2

Taking centre stage of the painting is the child Jesus and His mother Mary. Jesus pricks His finger on an exposed nail in the wood. Like any mother, Mary comforts and consoles her child. This scene points the way to Jesus' future crucifixion when Mary would kneel at the foot of the cross watching her Son, 'the one whom they have pierced.' (Zechariah 12:10)

5.

On the right of the painting stands another young child. He is John the Baptist, the cousin of Jesus. Standing with a bowl of water in his hand, we are reminded of John's future mission to prepare hearts and minds for the coming of Christ. He is the one who would baptise Jesus which would mark the beginning of His public ministry.

Gospel
Luke 3:1-6

The call of John the Baptist

In the fifteenth year of Tiberius Caesar's reign, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judaea, Herod tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of the lands of Ituraea and Trachonitis, Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene, during the pontificate of Annas and Caiaphas the word of God came to John son of Zechariah, in the wilderness. He went through the whole Jordan district proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, as it is written in the book of the sayings of the prophet Isaiah:

A voice cries in the wilderness:
Prepare a way for the Lord,
make his paths straight.
Every valley will be filled in,
every mountain and hill be laid low,
winding ways will be straightened
and rough roads made smooth.
And all mankind shall see the salvation of God.
(JB)

Prompts for Lectio Divina.

- How do you feel in this season of Advent? Happy? Puzzled? Expectant? Stressed? Joyful? Take how you feel to the Lord.
- How have you spread the *Good news* in our own locality? Do you sometimes think you are a voice in the wilderness? Do not focus completely on failure. There will have been successes as well.
- John preaches a "baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." What does repentance mean to you? Are there areas of your life where you feel called to repent or seek forgiveness?
- How do you experience God's forgiveness. How can this passage encourage you to turn toward God more fully?
- The imagery of valleys being filled, mountains made low, and rough ways made smooth speaks of transformation. What aspects of your life do you feel God might want to transform?
- How might this transformation allow you to experience God more fully and help others to do the same?

Homily - Pope Francis
Second Sunday of Advent- Gospel Reading: Luke 3:1-6

On this second Sunday of Advent, the Liturgy places us in the school of John the Baptist, who preached “a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins”. Perhaps we ask ourselves, “Why do we have to convert? Conversion is about an atheist who becomes a believer or a sinner who becomes just. But we don’t need it. We are already Christians. So we are okay”. But this isn’t true. In thinking like this, we don’t realize that it is precisely because of this presumption — that we are Christians, that everyone is good, that we’re okay — that we must convert: from the supposition that, all things considered, things are fine as they are and we don’t need any kind of conversion. But let us ask ourselves: is it true that in the various situations and circumstances of life, we have within us the same feelings that Jesus has? Is it true that we feel as Christ feels? For example, when we suffer some wrongdoing or some insult, do we manage to react without animosity and to forgive from the heart those who apologize to us? How difficult it is to forgive! How difficult! “You’re going to pay for this” — that phrase comes from inside! When we are called to share joys or sorrows, do we know how to sincerely weep with those who weep and rejoice with those who rejoice? When we should express our faith, do we know how to do it with courage and simplicity, without being ashamed of the Gospel? Thus we can ask ourselves so many questions. We’re not all right. We must always convert and have the sentiments that Jesus had.

The voice of the Baptist still cries in the deserts of humanity today, which are — what are today’s deserts? — closed minds and hardened hearts. And [his voice] causes us to ask ourselves if we are actually following the right path, living a life according to the Gospel. Today, as then, he admonishes us with the words of the Prophet Isaiah: “Prepare the way of the Lord!” (v. 4). It is a pressing invitation to open one’s heart and receive the salvation that God offers ceaselessly, almost obstinately, because he wants us all to be free from the slavery of sin. But the text of the prophet amplifies this voice, portending that “all flesh shall see the salvation of God” (v. 6). And salvation is offered to every man, and every people, without exclusion, to each one of us. None of us can say, “I’m a saint; I’m perfect; I’m already saved”. No. We must always accept this offer of salvation. This is the reason for the Year of Mercy: to go farther on this journey of salvation, this path that Jesus taught us. God wants all of mankind to be saved through Jesus, the one mediator (cf. 1 Tim 2:4-6).

Therefore, each one of us is called to make Jesus known to those who do not yet know him. But this is not to proselytize. No, it is to open a door. “Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!” (1 Cor 9:16), St Paul declared. If Our Lord Jesus has changed our lives, and he changes it every time we go to him, how can we not feel the passion to make him known to those we encounter at work, at school, in our apartment building, in the hospital, in meeting places? If we look around us, we find people who would be willing to begin — or begin again — a journey of faith were they to encounter Christians in love with Jesus. Shouldn’t we and couldn’t we be these Christians? I leave you this question: “Am I truly in love with Jesus? Am I convinced that Jesus offers me and gives me salvation?” And, if I am in love, I have to make him known! But we must be courageous: lay low the mountains of pride and rivalry; fill in the ravines dug by indifference and apathy; make straight the paths of our laziness and our compromises.

May the Virgin Mary, who is Mother and knows how to do so, help us to tear down the walls and the obstacles that impede our conversion, that is, our journey toward the encounter with the Lord. He alone, Jesus alone can fulfil all the hopes of man!

ANGELUS

Saint Peter’s Square

Sunday, 6 December 2015

(Gaudete Sunday)
Group leader's preparation for session 3 - Third Sunday of Advent
Gospel Reading: Luke 3:10-18

1. Take time to read and reflect on the image.
2. Pray with the Gospel passage during your personal prayer time
3. Take time to read and reflect on the homily by Pope Francis.

Opening Question: This Sunday is the third Sunday of Advent. It is also known as Gaudete Sunday. The word 'Gaudete' means joy. We are fast approaching Christmas, in fact we are mid way there. We are invited to share in the joy that a saviour will soon be born and to share this good news with others. Has your faith brought you any moments of joy over the past year?

Opening Prayer:

God Our Father, sometimes it is hard to speak the message of joy into a world which can sometimes focus on the negative. We pray that you help us find a way to speak the message of hope and joy into difficult situations and to be a positive presence in the lives of those around us who are suffering, in need and who just find the world a difficult place to be. We place into your hands all those who work for justice in the world. Help us to be a part of that change and to recognise through our Baptismal vocation that we are called to be the bearers of the good news both in word and action. We ask this in the name of your Son, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Setting the context

This coming Sunday is known as, *Gaudete Sunday*, a day when we step back to some degree from the penitential aspect of Advent and rejoice at the imminent arrival of our Lord and Saviour at Christmas. It is still a time of preparation and it is fitting that in this Sunday's Gospel we are given the ultimate example in John the Baptist of how to carry out that preparation. John was the herald of Jesus but when we look at today's gospel it is almost as if we need to take a double take. The words and advice that John gives seem to be exactly what Jesus would say. In fact, the people who came to hear those words and receive that advice are like the people who came to Jesus when he was carrying out his mission. If you apply simple logic to John's life and work, it is only natural and inevitable that he would pre-empt the message of the one he was preparing the way for. He was a true disciple, and a disciple can only ever reflect the words and teaching of his master.

We are told that a feeling of expectancy had grown among the people who were beginning to wonder if he may be the long awaited and yearned for Messiah. The humility of this disciple shines through. John takes this feeling of expectancy and redirects it and makes it grow even greater. He is actually saying to them that if they think what he was saying and doing is great, then wait and see because one even greater is on the way. He said to them if you feel like rejoicing and celebrating because of what I have said and done, you will have greater cause to rejoice and celebrate because the one who is coming after me is going to outdo me in every way because I am just the disciple, he is the master. I am the creature; he is the creator.

We can have the same feeling of expectancy as we draw nearer to the celebration of our Saviour's birth. The Creator entered his creation out of love for us. He is with us always through his Word and sacrament and he has promised he will come again. Wonderful reasons to rejoice.



Background to the painting.

This painting, by the artist Fra Angelico (1395–1455), illustrates the Baptism of Jesus by John in the River Jordan. The image highlights the two natures of Christ, his humanity and divinity. It also marks the beginning of Jesus' public ministry of teaching, preaching and healing.

Following the reading of the script, invite participants to share what struck them from the painting.

4.) Observe the cloud in the background. In the Old Testament, the image of a cloud represented the presence of God. In this cloud, we see emerge a voice from heaven and a dove to represent the Holy Spirit. Here, we are reminded of the words of Scripture, "...suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." (MT 3) Here we see the works of the Blessed Trinity; Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

1.) When we first look at this painting, we are drawn to the figure of Christ who is being baptised by John in the River Jordan. John, with foot outstretched to reach above, pours water over the head of Jesus from a gold dish.

2.) In this scene, we are reminded that Jesus opens up the way to new life through our Baptism. Jesus allows Himself to be baptised to fulfil the scriptures and to sanctify a new Baptism through the Holy Spirit.

3.) Notice the two angels to the left of Jesus, one carries a dark, soiled garment representing the old sinful life. The other carries a white garment representing the sacrament of our Baptism when we are clothed in the light of Christ and enter into a new life of grace.



5.) Let your eyes follow the river emerging from the barren hills in the background. The barren hills depict the emptiness of the world without God and the water represents the river of new life, the water of Baptism and the Spirit. Jesus is the living water come down from heaven. He comes to bring us new life.

The Baptism of Jesus, Fra Angelico (1437-1435)

6.) Notice the two figures to the right of the painting. It is St Dominic and a female Dominican saint. Historically they would not have been at the Baptism of Jesus, and yet, they are included in the scene to emphasise the unity between this historical event and the liturgy of the Church.

Gospel
Luke 3:10-18

'Someone is coming who will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire'

When all the people asked John, 'What must we do?' he answered, 'If anyone has two tunics he must share with the man who has none, and the one with something to eat must do the same.' There were tax collectors too who came for baptism, and these said to him, 'Master, what must we do?' He said to them, 'Exact no more than your rate.' Some soldiers asked him in their turn, 'What about us? What must we do?' He said to them, 'No intimidation! No extortion! Be content with your pay!'

A feeling of expectancy had grown among the people, who were beginning to think that John might be the Christ, so John declared before them all, 'I baptise you with water, but someone is coming, someone who is more powerful than I am, and I am not fit to undo the strap of his sandals; he will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing-fan is in his hand to clear his threshing-floor and to gather the wheat into his barn; but the chaff he will burn in a fire that will never go out.' As well as this, there were many other things he said to exhort the people and to announce the Good News to them. (JB)

Prompts for Lectio Divina

- Do you have a feeling of expectancy in Advent about the coming Christ?
- What does Gaudete Sunday mean to you?
- As we are more than halfway through Advent, how has it gone?
- John is the great Baptist. How aware are we of the significance of our own baptism?
- John provides us with an "Examination of Conscience" on how to behave and how to treat people. What does this bring to mind?
- How does God's message both encourage and challenge you?
- What are your thoughts as you enter the last days of Advent?

Homily - Pope Francis
Third Sunday of Advent Gospel Reading: Luke 3:10-18

In today's Gospel, there is a question posed three times: "What shall we do?" (Lk 3:10, 12, 14). It is raised to John the Baptist by three categories of people: First, the crowd in general; second, the publicans or tax collectors; and, third, some soldiers. Each of these groups questions the prophet on what must be done to implement the conversion that he is preaching. John's reply to the question of the crowd is sharing essential goods. He told the first group, the crowd, to share basic necessities, and therefore says: "He who has two coats, let him share with him who has none; and he who has food, let him do likewise" (v. 11). Then, he tells the second group, the tax collectors, to collect no more than the amount owed. What does this mean? No taking 'bribes', John the Baptist is clear. And he tells the third group, the soldiers, not to extort anything from anyone and to be content with their wages (cf. v. 14). There are three answers to the three questions of these groups. Three answers for an identical path of repentance, which is manifested in concrete commitments to justice and solidarity. It is the path that Jesus points to in all his preaching: the path of diligent love for neighbour.

From John the Baptist's admonitions, we understand the general tendencies of those who at that time held power, in various forms. Things have not changed very much. However, no category of people is excluded from following the path of repentance to obtain salvation, not even the tax collectors, considered sinners by definition: not even they are excluded from salvation. God does not preclude anyone from the opportunity to be saved. He is — so to speak — anxious to show mercy, to show it towards everyone, and to welcome each one into the tender embrace of reconciliation and forgiveness.

We feel that this question — "What shall we do?" — is ours also. Today's liturgy tells us, in the words of John, that it is necessary to repent, to change direction and take the path of justice, solidarity, sobriety: these are the essential values of a fully human and genuinely Christian life. Repent! It sums up the message of the Baptist. And the Liturgy of this Third Sunday of Advent helps us to rediscover a special dimension of repentance: joy. Whoever repents and approaches the Lord, feels joy. The prophet Zephaniah says to us today: "Sing aloud, O daughter of Zion!", addressing Jerusalem (Zeph 3:14); and the apostle Paul exhorts the Christians of Philippi: "Rejoice in the Lord always" (Phil 4:4). Today, it takes courage to speak of joy, which, above all, requires faith! The world is beset by many problems, the future is burdened by uncertainties and fears. Yet, Christians are a joyful people, and their joy is not something superficial and ephemeral, but deep and stable, because it is a gift from the Lord that fills life. Our joy comes from the certainty that "the Lord is at hand" (Phil 4:5): he is close with his tenderness, his mercy, his forgiveness and his love.

May the Virgin Mary help us to strengthen our faith, so that we are able to welcome the God of joy, the God of mercy, who always wants to live in the midst of his children. May our Mother teach us to share tears with those who weep, in order to be able to also share a smile.

Homily
Pope Francis
13 December 2015

Group leader's preparation for session 4 - Fourth Sunday of Advent

Gospel Reading: Luke 1:39-45

1. Take time to read and reflect on the image.
2. Pray with the Gospel passage during your personal prayer time
3. Take time to read and reflect on the homily by Pope Francis.

Opening Question: As we move into the 4th Sunday of Advent, the joy and anticipation of Christmas is fast approaching. The pace we may have experienced in the previous weeks is now quickening as we carry out those last minute preparations and purchases. It can be difficult to keep up the momentum of prayer and reflection at this time. What practical ways might help you keep your focus on Jesus in these final days of Advent?

Opening Prayer: Heavenly Father, as we prepare to celebrate the birth of your only begotten Son, Jesus this Christmas may we experience the beauty, joy, comfort and peace of the season. Joy - to be reminded of your love for each one of us; Comfort - in the knowledge that Jesus is with us and continues to be present at each moment of our lives; Peace - peace of heart and mind in the knowledge that we can bring all of our worries and anxieties to Jesus. Help us also to recognise that this time isn't just about what we ourselves receive but what we can also give to others in your honour and glory. Amen

Setting the context

The scene set out before us in the Gospel is one many of us would be very familiar with. The Visitation is one of the Joyful Mysteries of the Rosary, and it is entirely appropriate to call it joyful. It gives us the prayer that most of learn from our earliest days, The Hail Mary. This prayer is steeped in Holy Scripture, and it concludes with a petition to Our Blessed Mother to intercede for us in all aspects of our lives, even to the very end of our lives. The Visitation shows us that Mary put aside all self-concern to travel a significant distance to be with her cousin, Elizabeth. This act of love led to the earliest proclamations of the coming of Christ to be found in the New Testament. Elizabeth greets Mary with the title of "Mother of my Lord." And John, her unborn son, gives further testimony to the truth of those words when he leaps in Elizabeth's womb. This is an example of two prophets acting in unison through the guidance of the Holy Spirit. We know that John was one of the greatest prophets but there can be a failing to acknowledge that his mother was a prophet too. Both proclaimed their faith in the imminent arrival of the Messiah and in doing so, both prepared the way for his coming. They are great figures for this season of Advent.

On this fourth and final Sunday of Advent we too look forward to the imminent arrival of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ. We have been listening to the prophets such as Isaiah who foretold that the Holy one of God the Most High would live among us. They didn't know when that would happen because that was God's business. Their main concern was to proclaim God's Word and stay true to their discipleship.

We know that the words of all the prophets, including Mary, Elizabeth and John have been fulfilled. The Word was made flesh and dwelt amongst us. He has told us that he will come again, either at the end of our lives or at the end of time. We too, don't know exactly when that will be, but we too are called to rejoice and be joyful in the promises of Christ, proclaim his Gospel and stay true to our discipleship

Background to the painting.

Jen Norton is a catholic contemporary award winning artist. She considers the art of painting as a form of prayer and a way to visualise the beauty and richness of her Catholic faith. In her own words, her paintings invite us to ,’pause and listen so that one can hear the whisper of a mighty Creator.’ This painting depicts the Visitation of Mary to her cousin Elizabeth.

Following the reading of the script, invite participants to share what struck them from the painting.

1.) In the distance a newly pregnant Mary travels in haste to visit her cousin Elizabeth. The distance would have been approximately 150 km’s. Pretty impressive for a pregnant girl traveling on her own, but then Mary doesn’t seem like the kind of woman to sit around waiting for things to happen, unsure of her steps.

2.) Elizabeth was older, believed to be beyond child-bearing years. She was the wife of the priest Zechariah, and from the priestly line of Aaron herself. One can imagine her having all the wealth and prestige that comes with that title. Yet she spent her life wishing for the one thing she seemingly couldn’t have: a child. The halo in the colours of a sunset indicate her age.

4.) In the distance, we see Mary approaching, the life within her bearing the springtime from within its sacred ark. Light emanates from her womb, trees break into blossom and a skein of geese follow her, representing the Holy Spirit.



3.) Elizabeth eagerly awaits Mary’s arrival and to share in the joy of their pregnancies in the knowledge that the paths of their children would be closely intertwined.

6.) Between the two women is all of life... young and old, beautiful and messy, fragrant flowers and dry grass. Within their stories is the transition from the Old Testament of Law to the New Testament of Grace. The sunset is greeted by the sunrise and in the tininess of new life a timeless story of fulfilment.

5.) Her rich garments contain patterns of faded roses and dandelion seed pods for blowing wishes into the wind. Yet the God of Life is full of surprises and suddenly this woman of God finds herself bearing new life! In the surrounding foliage, we see locusts and bees buzzing in the flowers, foreshadowing the desert existence her son will live.

Visitation of Mary, Jen Norton (2019)

Gospel
Luke 1:39-45

Why should I be honoured with a visit from the mother of my Lord?

Mary set out and went as quickly as she could to a town in the hill country of Judah. She went into Zechariah's house and greeted Elizabeth. Now as soon as Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leapt in her womb and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. She gave a loud cry and said, 'Of all women you are the most blessed, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. Why should I be honoured with a visit from the mother of my Lord? For the moment your greeting reached my ears, the child in my womb leapt for joy. Yes, blessed is she who believed that the promise made her by the Lord would be fulfilled.' (JB)

Prompts for Lectio Divina.

- What emotions does this piece of Scripture evoke in you?
- Do you acknowledge charity and concern in the same way that Mary shows in the Visitation?
- Mary, Elizabeth, and John were prophets. Our Baptism calls us to be prophets (a messenger from God) too. What does this mean and how can we answer this calling?
- Are our hearts and minds open to God's words as Elizabeth's were to the words of the Mother of God?
- Remember the Visitation is the 2nd Joyful Mystery. It is followed by the Joyful Mystery, The Nativity. The Word was made flesh and dwelt amongst us. Let us reflect on this.
- Christmas is very close. How does this make you feel?

Homily - Pope Francis
Fourth Sunday of Advent Gospel Reading: Luke 1:39-45

After receiving the annunciation of the angel, the Virgin does not stay at home, thinking over what has happened and considering the problems and pitfalls, which were certainly not lacking: because, poor girl, she did not know what to do with this news, with the culture of that age... She did not understand... On the contrary, she first thinks of someone in need; instead of being absorbed in her own problems, she thinks about someone in need, she thinks about Elizabeth, her relative, who was advanced in years and with child, something strange and miraculous. Mary sets out with generosity, without letting herself be daunted by the discomforts of the journey, responding to an inner impulse that called her to be close and to help. A long road, kilometre after kilometre, and no bus went there: she had to go on foot. She went out to help, sharing her joy. Mary gives Elizabeth the joy of Jesus, the joy she carried in her heart and in her womb. She goes to her and proclaims her feelings, and this proclamation of feelings then became a prayer, the Magnificat, which we all know. And the text says that Our Lady "arose and went with haste" (v. 39).

She arose and went. In the last stretch of the Advent journey, let us be guided by these two verbs. To arise and to go in haste : these are the two movements that Mary made and that she also invites us to make as Christmas approaches. First of all, arise. After the angel's annunciation, a difficult period loomed ahead for the Virgin: her unexpected pregnancy exposed her to misunderstandings and even severe punishment, including stoning, in the culture of that time. Let us imagine how many concerns and worries she had! Nevertheless, she did not become discouraged, she was not disheartened: but she arose. She did not look down at her problems, but up to God. And she did not think about who to ask for help, but to whom to bring help. She always thought about others: that is Mary, always thinking of the needs of others. She would do the same later, at the wedding in Cana, when she realizes that there is no more wine. It is a problem for other people, but she thinks about this and tries to find a solution. Mary always thinks about others. She also thinks of us.

Let us learn this way of reacting from Our Lady: to arise, especially when difficulties threaten to crush us. To arise, so as not to get bogged down in problems, sinking into self-pity or falling into a sadness that paralyzes us. But why get up? Because God is great and is ready to lift us up again if we reach out to him. So let us cast to him the negative thoughts, the fears that block every impulse and that prevent us from moving forward. And then let us do as Mary did: let us look around and look for someone to whom we can be of help! Is there an elderly person I know to whom I can give a little help, company? Everyone, think about it. Or offering a service to someone, a kindness, a phone call? But who can I help? I get up and I help. By helping others, we help ourselves rise up again from difficulties.

The second movement is to go in haste. This does not mean to proceed with agitation, in a hurried manner, no, it does not mean this. Instead, it means conducting our days with a joyful step, looking ahead with confidence, without dragging our feet, as slaves to complaints — these complaints ruin so many lives, because one starts complaining and complaining, and life drains away. Complaining leads you always to look for someone to blame. On her way to Elizabeth's house, Mary proceeds with the quick step of one whose heart and life are full of God, full of his joy. So, let us ask ourselves, for our benefit: how is my "step"? Am I proactive or do I linger in melancholy, in sadness? Do I move forward with hope or do I stop and feel sorry for myself? If we proceed with the tired step of grumbling and small talk, we will not bring God to anyone, we will only bring bitterness and dark things. Instead, it is very good for us to cultivate a healthy sense of humour, as for example, Saint Thomas More or Saint Philip Neri did. We can also ask for this grace, the grace of a healthy sense of humour: it does so much good. Let us not forget that the first act of charity we can do for our neighbours is to offer them a serene and smiling face. It is bringing the joy of Jesus to them, as Mary did with Elizabeth. May the Mother of God take us by the hand, and help us to arise and to go in haste towards Christmas!

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