

lectio divina

PRAYING THE SCRIPTURES IN ADVENT Year C

Lectio divina

Lectio divina is the meditative reading of a text of God's Word, the Scriptures, alone or with others, which leads to prayer, transformation of life, and, through that transformed life, the sharing with others of the mystery of God entrusted to us. This practice of prayer involves the whole person. Through our senses we read, we meditate using our reason and imagination, and we pray and transform our life with our will. It is not just an interior practice but one that engages with the issues of our Christian life and prompts us to work with them. At different times, the emphasis may be on different aspects of the prayer. But it would be unwise to omit any of them altogether.

In the light of what has been said, we can look at the presuppositions that underpin this form of Scriptural prayer. Firstly, it embraces the Scriptures as God's Word speaking to us. It emphasises that this practice is a personal encounter with the eternal Word, who is Jesus. It sees, as the source and goal of this prayer, the life of Christian discipleship.

The image of the arch is sometimes used to speak of prayer. Prayer is designated as the keystone of the arch, the stone at the top which takes the strain, and stops the sides of the arch from falling in. However, the keystone will not stay up there by itself: it needs the sides of the arch. The sides of the arch are working with our life; to root out the vices and to practice the virtues. The practice of *lectio* is not a discrete or isolated event, totally sufficient in itself: it takes place within the living of Christian discipleship. It arises out of the conscious determined effort to live as disciples of Jesus and has as its goal to strengthen that determination and effort. Transformation of life is an essential element of praying the Scriptures.

Lectio divina arises out of a faith relationship with Jesus and reaches its fulfilment in the transformation of that faith relationship. The Scriptures are more open to those active disciples who love God and who are endeavouring to transform their life in conformity with their faith. It is the heart filled with this loving faith that will be most open to the spiritual message of the Scriptures. Active effort to live a life of Christian virtue is an important preparation for reading the Scriptures.

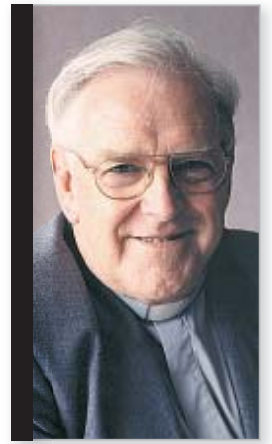
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Artwork by CCD students from: Wheeler Heights Public School; Cheltenham Girls High, Narrabeen Public School; Killarney Vale Public School; Narrabeen Lakes Public School; Hornsby Public School and Berowra Public School.

Bishop David's Introduction

Getting to know Jesus in a new way, at a deeper level, as we have been invited to do during the Year of Grace, is just like getting to know anyone. We begin by spending more time with a person. We pay attention to them. We get to know their story more completely. Eventually, we become more and more curious and fascinated by how the person acts, what motivates that person, how he or she thinks.



Of course, the key here is not only to learn more about Jesus, but to come to really know him, to experience a relationship. It is easy to imagine that Jesus knows me. It is more difficult to imagine that I am in a relationship with Jesus, and we know each other and there is something special about this relationship.

For example, some of us will get to know Jesus and become really fascinated by his mother and father and that will shape our sense of who he is and our relationship with him. Some of us will come to love the way he chooses and interacts with his disciples. Many of us will learn a great deal about Jesus from how he tells stories and reveals things about God and about the Kingdom of God. Still others of us will become engaged by how Jesus interacts with and heals sinners and sick people. Perhaps we will identify with this or that story which will characterise our particular relationship with him.


We begin to cherish these quiet moments of discovering who this Jesus is, as we listen with the ear of our heart, moments that will become like a spiritual oasis in the midst of life's busyness. The prayer time will restore our spirit. The spiritual insights will help to keep us focused. We may like it so much that we'll decide to carry over into 2013 the practice of setting aside daily quiet time with God as we pray with the sacred Scriptures.

Come, Lord Jesus, come into that dark and lonely place in our heart. Let us feel and know your love. If only we carry that love with us each day, the days of Advent will be yet another time for us to "begin afresh from Christ".

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "David L. Walker".

David L. Walker
Bishop of Broken Bay

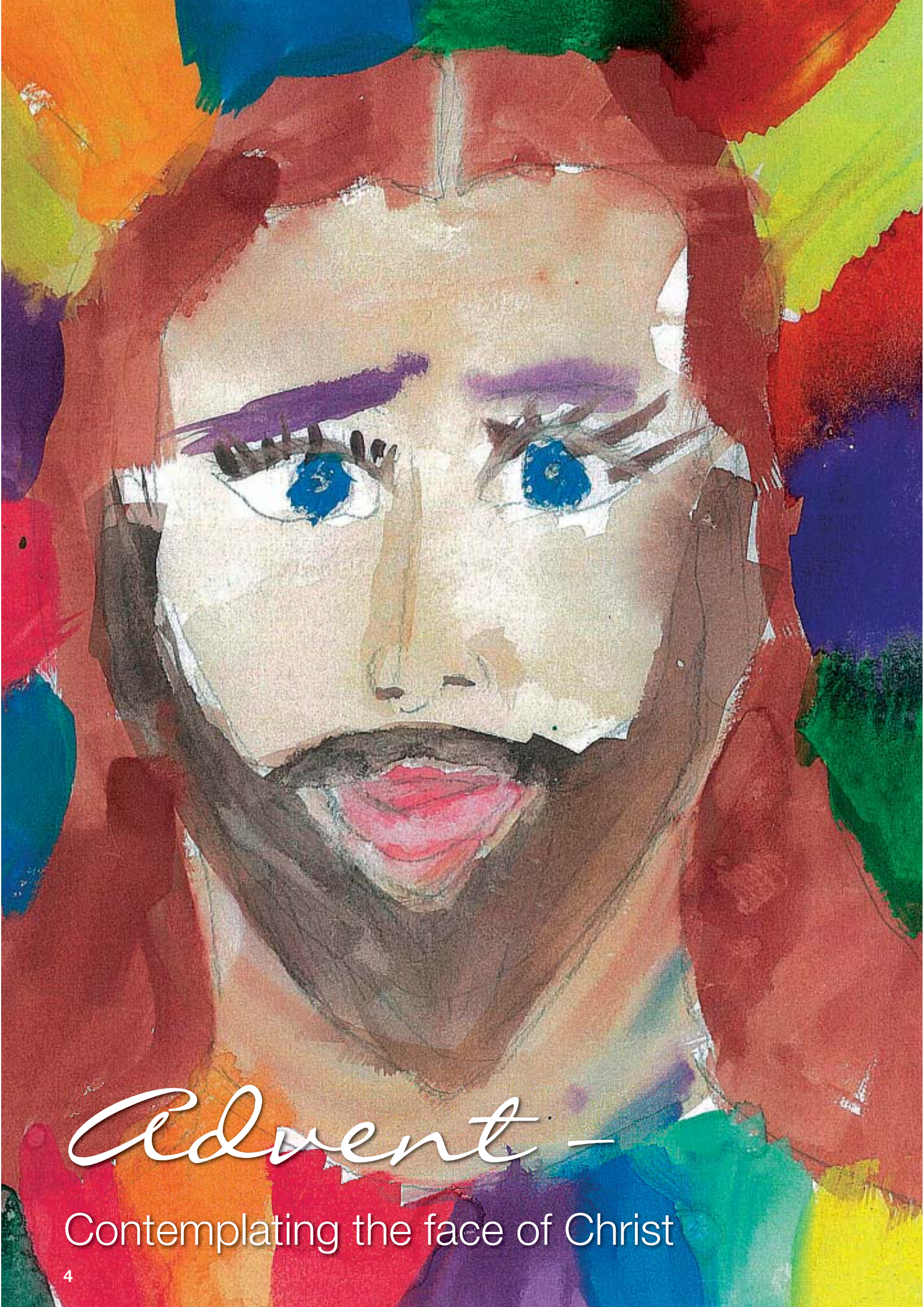
How to use this booklet

 This booklet invites you to prayerfully and meditatively reflect on the Sunday readings during Advent and select readings of the Christmas season.

An outline of a meditative and prayerful reflection is offered on the inside covers of both the front and back pages of this booklet, which can be used as a bookmark throughout the period.

To find out more about *lectio divina* please visit www.dbb.org.au

This booklet is an instrument that can be used in a variety of ways. Please use it in whatever way suits you best.



Advent —

Contemplating the face of Christ

*H*e was squatting on a patch of dirt and absorbed in making a train out of a heap of creek pebbles. Three year old Vincent, my grandnephew, is railroad engineer material! I watched from my garden chair as he marshalled his locomotive, attached the tender and placed the carriages on the two tracks his finger had marked on the gravel. Then he looked up towards me. In that fleeting moment, I saw my father, a fitter and turner, long gone to the God who engineered it all. It was the shadow of dad's face, the cheek bones, the eyes set fixedly in concentration. Vincent then turned in profile to reach for more stones and this time I glimpsed his mother, my niece, with the tip of her nose and firm line of chin. Then, he sat back, finished with his work shift and full-faced me, grinning. And I saw only Vincent, the others' ripples of his DNA and imprints of their nurturing, absorbed into the face of this unique human being and my chest turned over in delight and love.

This year in Advent we are called to contemplate the face of Christ. What is the unique face, like Vincent, that speaks of the mystery of God-coming-amongst us? What also are the shadows, hints and transitory images that will flit through our thoughts and feelings as we bring the face of Jesus to mind? As with the fleeting familial glimpses we recognise through the individual faces of our children, the Church now turns to a fresh cycle of word and memory and paints a multi-faceted portrait of Immanuel.

A starting point is the person Jesus reflected in the Lucan Gospel passages of Advent, a random sampling of his life story. We hear of him speaking to his disciples, being spoken about by John, and being carried in the womb of Mary. There is the mature Jesus, travelling with his like-minded motley group of friends, proclaiming the realisation of the Kingdom of glorious peace and fullness. There is his contemporary, the prophet John, drawing a picture of his person and message, which will announce a new way of living. There he is, a very human village babe-in-womb, with mother, father, uncle and aunt and cousin. This individual, truly human being called Jesus, is a composite of hair, toenails, hunger, sleepiness, laughter, anger, lover of tradition, scorner of hypocrisy, middle-eastern Jew, Roman subject, small town boy. We must prime our contemplation this Advent on this individual who, across the centuries, is also vividly and intimately known to us as friend. We relate to him as individuals, my Jesus not being quite the same as your Jesus. But we also recognise him collectively in the wisdom of the teaching scriptures and church memories. There is even, and worth contemplating, the Jesus whom we do not know, whose person encloses in privacy the spirit that is integral to each of us, known only to himself and his God.

The four Lucan narratives of Advent assume we are tuned into this Gospel Jesus, both as followers and friends. Yet the purpose of the liturgical season is to bring us up short. So we are surprised with other demanding images, prodding us to see unexpected resemblances, facial throwbacks to hints of history and challenges to options for future.

Luke 21:25-28.34-36 On the First Sunday of Advent, we see *the face of the Jesus of Glory!* A face of power and great glory, transfigured for our transformation. Why will we be faint

with fear, why will there be distress and foreboding? Not because the face of this returning Lord will be the punisher, the cleaver, but because this Glory is a countenance such as we have never imagined. It will be outside our vision, beyond our comprehension. What will give us the strength to look upon this face, to stand and raise our heads? What will assure all who live on earth that our redemption, our fulfilment is drawing near? We have seen and known already his dear and faithful face in the person of the Son of Man!

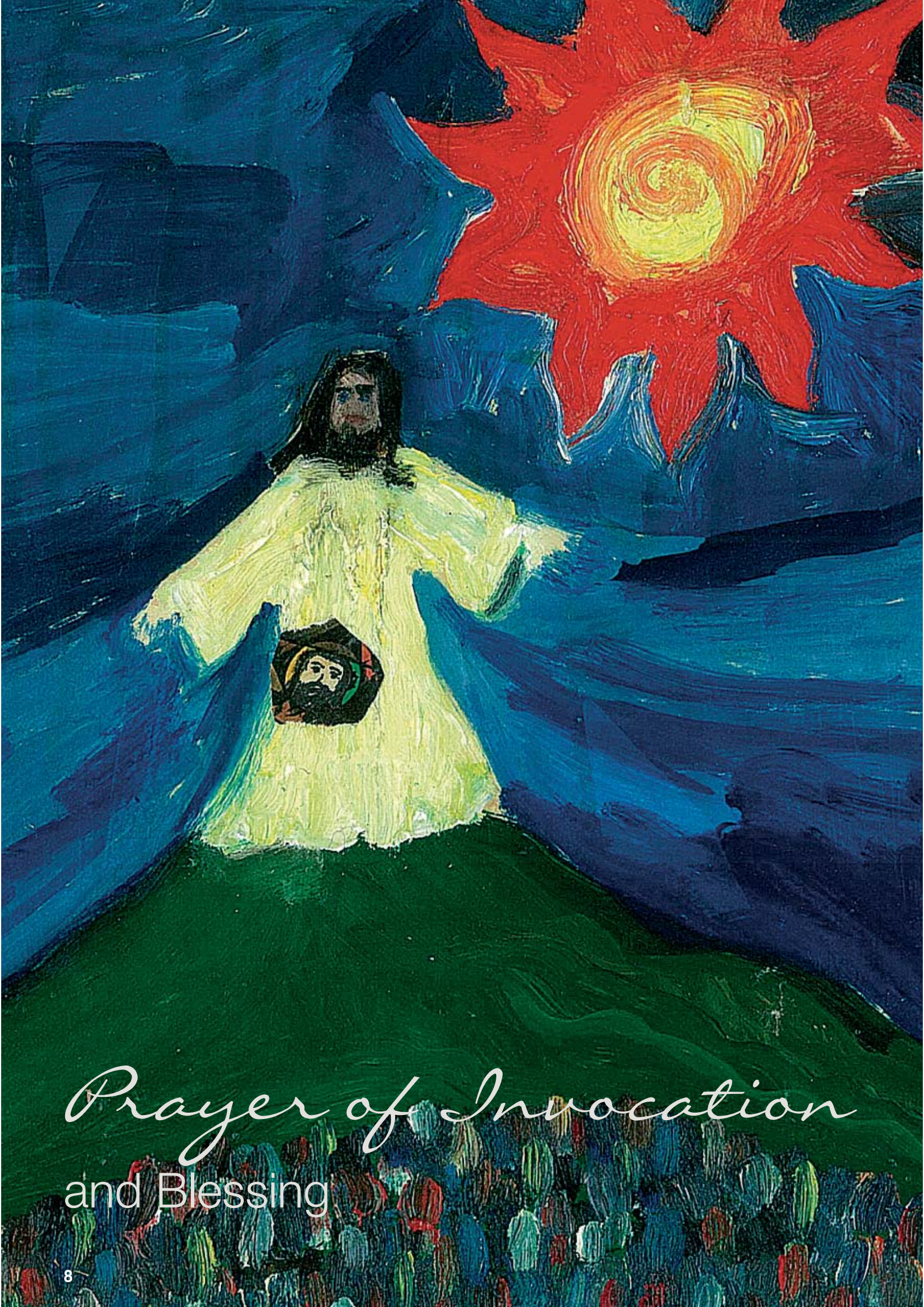
Luke 3:1-6 Thus we have been warned to be on guard and to be alert, and the Gospel of the Second Sunday, suggests why. It paints a portrait of rulers, of political power, of religious control, of conventional norms to whom the wild and prophetic figure of John proclaims repentance. The word of God came to him, called him out of the wilderness of nature into the wilderness of the everyday world where God was barely seen. For John, the face of He who is to come is revealed as one who alters the environment so that mountains of hate, valleys of despair, winding paths of confusion, are all radically morphed into the new way of the Lord, landscapes of peace, hope, clarity. *This is the face of the Jesus of counter-culture*, who is to challenge, to question, to demand our mental energy, our courage and our persistence. The face of the person, out there, who stirs our conscience!

Luke 3:10-18 Often, the stern gaze of Jesus, the activist, for whom the rejected must become the accepted, can be avoided on the grounds that he is a distant divine idealist, foreign to the reality of human frailty. Just as well then on the Third Sunday of Advent, we sharpen into closer focus on *the face of Jesus, fully human*, radiating the warmth of justice, softened by the tenderness of mercy. Gathering in expectation, coming forward to baptism and its new life, the householders, the tax collectors and the soldiers all know too well the pains of injustice, received or given. John's message from the One they ultimately will follow, asks for simple thoughtfulness and compassion: share one coat, give some of your food, collect only the fair amount, be satisfied with what you have. Nothing impossible, but a fair, honest, balanced, building-up way of doing things. He who will come is a mate, a neighbour who is solid, faithful and generous, the face seen on the roads of Galilee, well-known to outcasts, to the addicted, and the foolish.

Luke 1: 39-45 Now we come to the Fourth Sunday of Advent, and the delightful narrative of Mary and Elizabeth, and their pre-natal class extraordinaire! We meet face to face with an extended Jewish family in the Roman Province of Palestine. Mary with similar smile and a way of tossing her head, just like Elizabeth, her cousin, making conversation about their babies, "I'm sure it's a boy.... will they be tall like Uncle Josiah?" The Jesus of this Story is the face of the universal human story, the common beautiful visage which all people present to each other and turn towards their God. We are all in these eyes, this chin, the lips moving in song and laughter. We are all in these hands, touching and lifting up; in the halting steps under burdens, in the final calm mask of death. Our face-lines are there in the One who has brought all history into himself.

I may be a bit of a philistine or a chip off the old iconoclastic block, but I have some problems with many of the images of Christ we have as part of our art heritage in Christianity. Looking at and into the face of the Icon chosen for this contemplative Year of Grace confused me. I was perturbed to find it alienating, strange, formal, distant. Who is this? Whom am I looking at? How do I form a relationship with the person this image brings to mind? Why this barrier? Then I heard a whisper from my Augustinian background... *I searched for you, but you were already within me.* The image became just a fleeting glimpse and so a stimulus to pause and look to the Christ within me, our flesh and spirit shared in the divine and human DNA. I had no need to look out.

Not surprisingly, I then discovered a liberating aspect of iconology. It wasn't I who was to look at and meditate on the image: the image was focused on contemplating me...in all my frail and wonderful humanity, and the promise of my future glory, shared with him. And I was wide eyed with wonder and my heart burst with joy.



Prayer of Invocation
and Blessing

God spoke in the beginning;
out of darkness came night and day,
out of emptiness came creation,
out of loneliness came humankind.
And God said, “This is very good.”

God spoke when the world was troubled;
giving voice to the prophets from earliest days,
moving through Mary as she gave birth to her child,
crying as a vulnerable baby lying in a manger.
Still God said, “This is very good.”

God speaks today;
breathing energy into our weary lives,
challenging our celebrations and sharing our pain,
dancing with songs of justice and peace.
Now we know that “This is very good.”

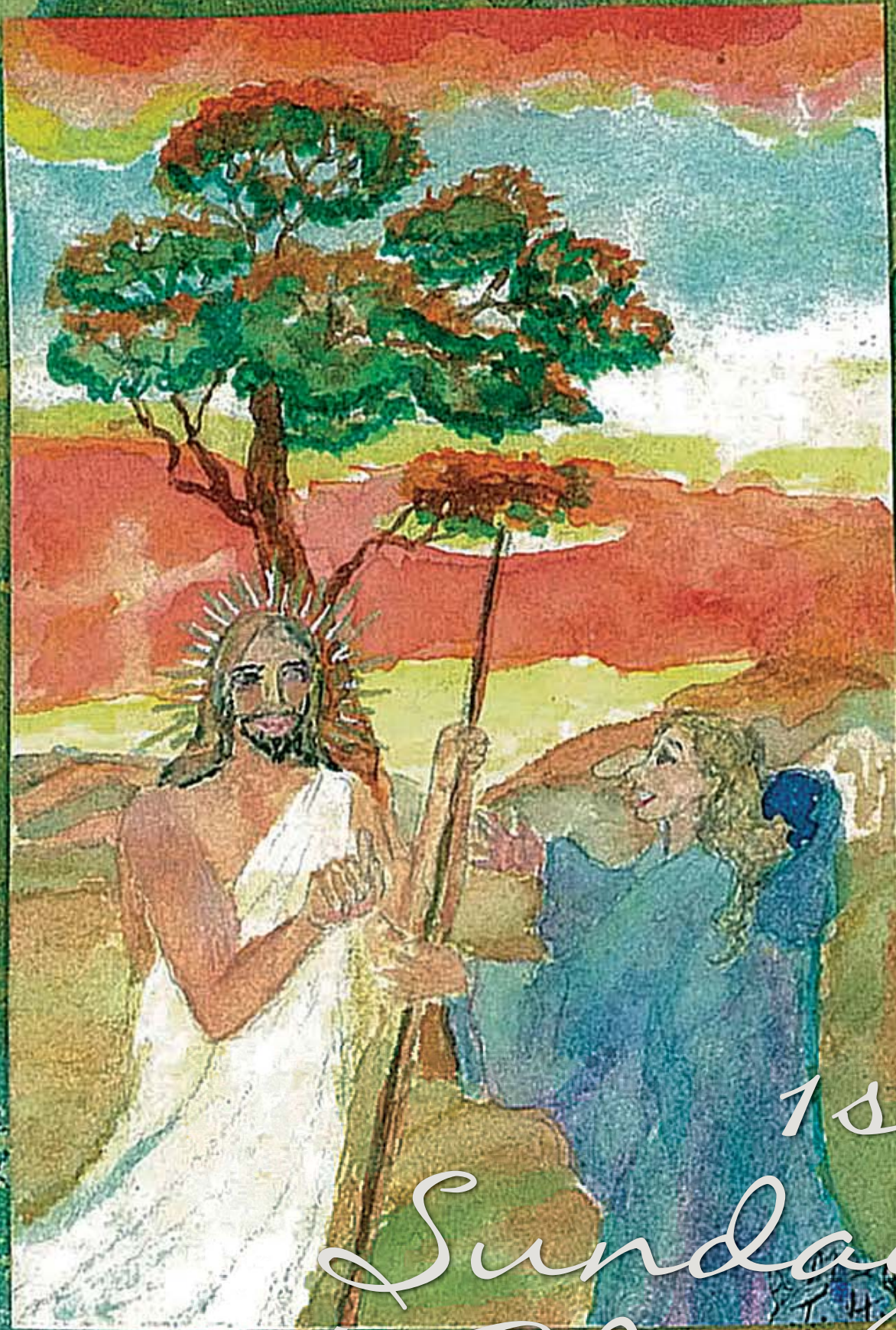
Sometimes it seems as though we spend our lives waiting – daydreaming about an upcoming holiday, worrying over some medical procedure, preparing for the birth of a child. Our days are filled with anticipation and anxiety over what the future holds.

As Catholic Christians we, too, spend our lives waiting. But we are waiting for something much bigger than a trip, bigger even than retirement or a wedding: we are waiting for the return of Jesus in glory. Advent heightens this sense of waiting because it marks not only our anticipation of Jesus’ final coming, but also our remembrance of his arrival into our world more than 2000 years ago.

Overwhelmed by the demands of the season, we can wait for Jesus in a state of anxiety, or cynicism, or harried indifference toward the miracle that is upon us. Or we can take our cue from the prayer we hear every Sunday and “wait in joyful hope for the coming of our Saviour, Jesus Christ.” Welcoming Jesus into our homes and our hearts, full of hope and joy, prepares us to celebrate properly the birth of Jesus and anticipate his return.

The stories of Advent help us strike the right note for our waiting: the prophecies of Isaiah and John the Baptist, full of their own stern hope; the pregnancies of Mary and Elizabeth, each as joyous as it is unexpected; the miracles, cures and other signs pointing the way to the Saviour.

Allow the Word of God to immerse you in this Advent season and contemplate the face of Christ and there find your own hope and joy as you wait in joyful hope for the coming of our Saviour, Jesus Christ.



1st
Sunday
of Advent

Jeremiah 33:14-16

The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will fulfil the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah. In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David; and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety. And this is the name by which it will be called: "The LORD is our righteousness."

1 Thessalonians 3:12 – 4:2

And may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, just as we abound in love for you. And may he so strengthen your hearts in holiness that you may be blameless before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints.

Finally, brothers and sisters, we ask and urge you in the Lord Jesus that, as you learned from us how you ought to live and to please God (as, in fact, you are doing), you should do so more and more. For you know what instructions we gave you through the Lord Jesus.

Luke 21:25-28, 34-36

"There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in a cloud' with power and great glory. Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near."

Then he told them a parable: "Look at the fig tree and all the trees; as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near. Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away. "Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day catch you unexpectedly, like a trap. For it will come upon all who live on the face of the whole earth. Be alert at all times, praying that you may have the strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of Man."

Reflection

As we prepare for the great miracle of Christmas, in the busy-ness of our lives, our bishops invite us to reflect on the Grace of God at work in those lives. Amidst the mad whirl

of parties, shopping, sending out cards, planning meals and holidays, do we take time to engage with our God and open our hearts to the Grace of God manifested in God's Son, Jesus the Christ. Do we recognise that at Christmas we celebrate that greatest of grace-filled moments, when our God became one like us, took on our humanity, so that we may share in God's divinity, so that we may call God, Abba, Father.

As we prepare for Christmas we look to the past, to the Grace of God at work in salvation history, to the present, how the Grace of God is at work today in our daily lives, and to the future, how, with the Grace of God, all people will come to know and praise God.

In our first reading we reflect on the past, happenings which took place over 2,500 years ago. We reflect on what the prophet Jeremiah told the people of God over 500 years before Jesus was born. Jeremiah writes that God "will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David; and he shall execute justice and righteousness." We know that Jesus is that righteous Branch. We know that through the Grace of God, Jesus took on our humanity and preached a message of justice and righteousness in all lands, a message of peace for all, in all times.

In our second reading we reflect on the present, how we are to live today. St Paul tells the Thessalonians, and us, to live as lovers of God and of each other. Grace is a five lettered word for love. Love is a four lettered word for God. God is love, pure love. Through the Grace of God we receive God's love and are asked to love God and to love each other. God so loved the world that God gave us God's only Son, Jesus, who is the reason for the season.

In the Gospel we reflect on the future. Jesus, the Son of God, the Christ, the Messiah, speaks of the end of time when we will see "the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and glory". Through the Grace of God, Jesus the Christ, the Son of Man, has dominion over all things including death. Through the Grace of God, the Word of God, Jesus the Son of Man, "will not pass away". Jesus tells us to be on our guard, to be alert and to pray that we "have the strength... to stand before the Son of Man".

I don't know about you but I would love to be in on the end of times, to see the Son of Man coming on a cloud in glory, to stand before the Son of Man and witness the passing of dominion over all things to the Father. What a Grace-filled day that would be!

Let us pray that through the Grace of God we may live as lovers of God and of all of God's people. Let us pray that in the busy-ness of this season, we take time to recognise the Grace of God in our lives, past, present and future.

2nd Sunday of Advent



Baruch 5:1-9

Take off the garment of your sorrow and affliction, O Jerusalem,
and put on for ever the beauty of the glory from God.

Put on the robe of the righteousness that comes from God;
put on your head the diadem of the glory of the Everlasting;
for God will show your splendour everywhere under heaven.
For God will give you evermore the name,
'Righteous Peace, Godly Glory'.

Arise, O Jerusalem, stand upon the height;
look towards the east,
and see your children gathered from west and east
at the word of the Holy One,
rejoicing that God has remembered them.

For they went out from you on foot,
led away by their enemies;
but God will bring them back to you,
carried in glory, as on a royal throne.

For God has ordered that every high mountain and the everlasting hills be made low
and the valleys filled up, to make level ground,
so that Israel may walk safely in the glory of God.

The woods and every fragrant tree
have shaded Israel at God's command.

For God will lead Israel with joy,
in the light of his glory,
with the mercy and righteousness that come from him.

Philippians 1:4-6, 8-11

I thank my God every time I remember you, constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you, because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now. I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ.

It is right for me to think this way about all of you, because you hold me in your heart, for all of you share in God's grace with me, both in my imprisonment and in the defence and confirmation of the gospel. For God is my witness, how I long for all of you with the compassion of Christ Jesus.

And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you to determine what is best, so that in the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God.

Luke 3:1-6

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah, “The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.’”

Reflection

In *Baruch 5:1-9* the actions of God have their purpose in us. God’s motives involve transforming the world and our very selves. The glory of God will be manifested in the wondrous workings around us, in the joy that bursts into our lives, and the peace that is found near and far. It is the grace of God we are called to recognise this Advent week.

God has begun a good work among us, in Jesus. This work will continue in us. It is the Good News of hope and salvation, a work that will transform not only our way of being and living, but will reap rewards when the domain of God, that is the entire world and all in it, give glory.

John the Baptist recognised the necessity for change, the call to transform and to call forth the great glory of God. John was the forerunner to Jesus and the prophet who continued the Old Testament call for God’s glory to reign. We are all John the Baptists in our own way. Called to leave the comfort and security of our present lives and to go and immerse ourselves this Advent, in the knowing of God. To participate in the renewal of life, where hope comes alive, goodness abounds and where glory to God is given.

God’s purpose in Jesus was to make known to all people the mercy and love of God. Christmas is a reminder of the fulfilment of God’s promise for all humanity. Advent reminds us of this and prepares us to continue this good news of Jesus for all time.

The Readings for this Advent Sunday are to prepare us for the wonders of God’s glory. Yet the great glory that is manifested in overflowing compassion and is revealed in peace that extends throughout the entire earth, can only be fully achieved through our participation. Like John the Baptist, who is remembered today in the Advent preparation, we are invited to become ‘pure and blameless, having produced the harvest of righteousness’ as the Reading from Phil 1:10-11 states. Advent, leading to Christmas, is preparation time, to get ready, so Christmas can

be fully experienced, enjoyed and lived out with God Immanuel, who came to be with us and who lives in us, so that we may live out the glory of God to others.

So perhaps we can consider this Advent week, and through this Year of Grace, how are we, like John the Baptist, participants in the proclamation of the good news? How can God's glory be manifested in us and throughout the world? It is Advent, and Christmas is approaching. We can prepare once more to wait in hope, revel in the wondrous glory of God among us, and in this Year of Grace, to fully live out our calling, as John the Baptist did. Amen.

3rd Sunday
of Advent



Zephaniah 3:14-18

Sing aloud, O daughter Zion; shout, O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter Jerusalem! The Lord has taken away the judgments against you, he has turned away your enemies. The king of Israel, the Lord, is in your midst; you shall fear disaster no more. On that day it shall be said to Jerusalem: Do not fear, O Zion; do not let your hands grow weak. The Lord, your God, is in your midst, a warrior who gives victory; he will rejoice over you with gladness, he will renew you in his love; he will exult over you with loud singing as on a day of festival. I will remove disaster from you, so that you will not bear reproach for it.

Philippians 4:4-7

Therefore, my brothers and sisters, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, my beloved. I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord. Yes, and I ask you also, my loyal companion, help these women, for they have struggled beside me in the work of the gospel, together with Clement and the rest of my co-workers, whose names are in the book of life. Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Luke 3:10-18

And the crowds asked him, "What then should we do?" In reply he said to them, "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise." Even tax collectors came to be baptised, and they asked him, "Teacher, what should we do?" He said to them, "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you." Soldiers also asked him, "And we, what should we do?" He said to them, "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages."

As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, John answered all of them by saying, "I baptise you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire." So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people.

Reflection

Like young and ardent lovers whose mutual caring and admiration leads each to regard no sacrifice as too costly or any request as unable to be fulfilled, so also are converts to the faith. Whether they be new or veteran converts, returning yet again to the Lord, their enthusiasm is palpable. Fresh from their encounter with the truth and thus having accepted to be transformed and redirected by it, the zeal of these neophytes is comparable to a wellspring waiting to be tapped or a cache of crude oil gushing upward unrestrained through the earth's surface. Because they are eager and willing to place their time, talent and treasure at the service of the community, converts represent a most valuable resource. For its part, the community becomes responsible for channelling but not stifling, for directing but not squelching, paid for encouraging but not abusing the gifts with which it has been blessed. To assist the gathered assembly in this regard, our readings for this third Sunday of Advent offer us a wise message of counsel and guidance.

From the prophet Zephaniah, in the first reading, perennial, Advent converts learn that the God who calls each of us to conversion remains in our midst, continually renewing, with gladness and love, all who turn toward the truth. In the Letter to the Philippians, Paul also calls the converted to rejoice in the nearness of God who hears prayers and whose peace safeguards our hearts and minds. The reading taken from Luke's gospel finds John the Baptist teaching a lesson that keeps the enthusiasm of the convert practical and in touch with the reality of the human experience.

In the course of his preaching near the Jordan, John attracted a variety of diverse converts. Ordinary people moved by his message and wishing to respond to it asked "What ought we to do?" Tax collectors, similarly motivated, said "What are we to do?" Soldiers, also, wanted to know how they could translate their willingness to change into action, "What about us?"

If their frank and eager questions are any indication of their zeal, then those who were drawn by John's message would probably have agreed to anything he asked of them. But John did not issue Herculean challenges; he simply directed the energies and generosity of his questioners toward the routine circumstances of their everyday lives. God does not require the extraordinary or bizarre; rather, blessedness is to be found in the ordinary and even in the banal.

If John's message were to be contemporised, we can almost hear him telling spouses to express the sincerity of their conversion to God by a renewal of their love and devotion to one another. Parents: revere your children. Children: respect your parents. Brothers and sisters: let sibling rivalry yield to mutual caring. Teachers: value your students, and students: realise that your mentors have precious wisdom to impart. Doctors, nurses: treat your patients with attentiveness and understanding. Lawyers: be defenders

of justice for all. Lawmakers: listen to the needs of your constituents. Constituents: exercise your right to vote justly. Workers: do a just day's work. Employers: pay fair wages without discrimination; do not foster policies that work against family life or values.

In a word, John would have his listeners pump the immediate zeal of their conversion into the long-term demands of daily living. Aware that this poses no easy challenge, Karl once observed that everyday morality is not so easy after all. To keep plodding ahead through a dull, tedious, everyday existence can often be more difficult than a unique deed whose heroism makes us run the danger of pride and self-satisfaction. Everyday morality means a life spent in duties and in the constant and daily renewed will to be just and good to others; it demands strength and commitment whereby we do not allow ourselves to sink into tired resignation because of what seems to be the ordinariness of our day. Such a life of seemingly humdrum banality becomes liveable and, even blessed, when the believer learns that conversion does not happen only at one specific moment in time but that it becomes the hidden principle permeating the direction of life as a whole.

Although we are now well into the season of Advent, there is still time to ask the question: "What ought we to do?" There is still time to channel our eager willingness to respond to that question into the large and small, significant and insignificant moments of each and every day where we meet the Christ whose face we are invited to contemplate.

4th Sunday
of Advent



Micah 5:1-4

Now you are walled around with a wall; siege is laid against us; with a rod they strike the ruler of Israel upon the cheek. But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days. Therefore he shall give them up until the time when she who is in labour has brought forth; then the rest of his kindred shall return to the people of Israel. And he shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of the LORD, in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God. And they shall live secure, for now he shall be great to the ends of the earth; and he shall be the one of peace. If the Assyrians come into our land and tread upon our soil, we will raise against them seven shepherds and eight installed as rulers.

Hebrews 10:5-10

Consequently, when Christ came into the world, he said, “Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired, but a body you have prepared for me; in burnt offerings and sin offerings you have taken no pleasure.

Then I said, ‘See, God, I have come to do your will, O God’ (in the scroll of the book it is written of me).” When he said above, “You have neither desired nor taken pleasure in sacrifices and offerings and burnt offerings and sin offerings” (these are offered according to the law), then he added, “See, I have come to do your will.” He abolishes the first in order to establish the second. And it is by God’s will that we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.

Luke 1:39-44

In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy.”

Reflection

We are so close to the birth of Jesus, with only a few days to go. It is hot and most of us are making our last minute preparations to ensure that Christmas Day runs smoothly. I hope that among all these busy times you have had time to just be, to wait, and that

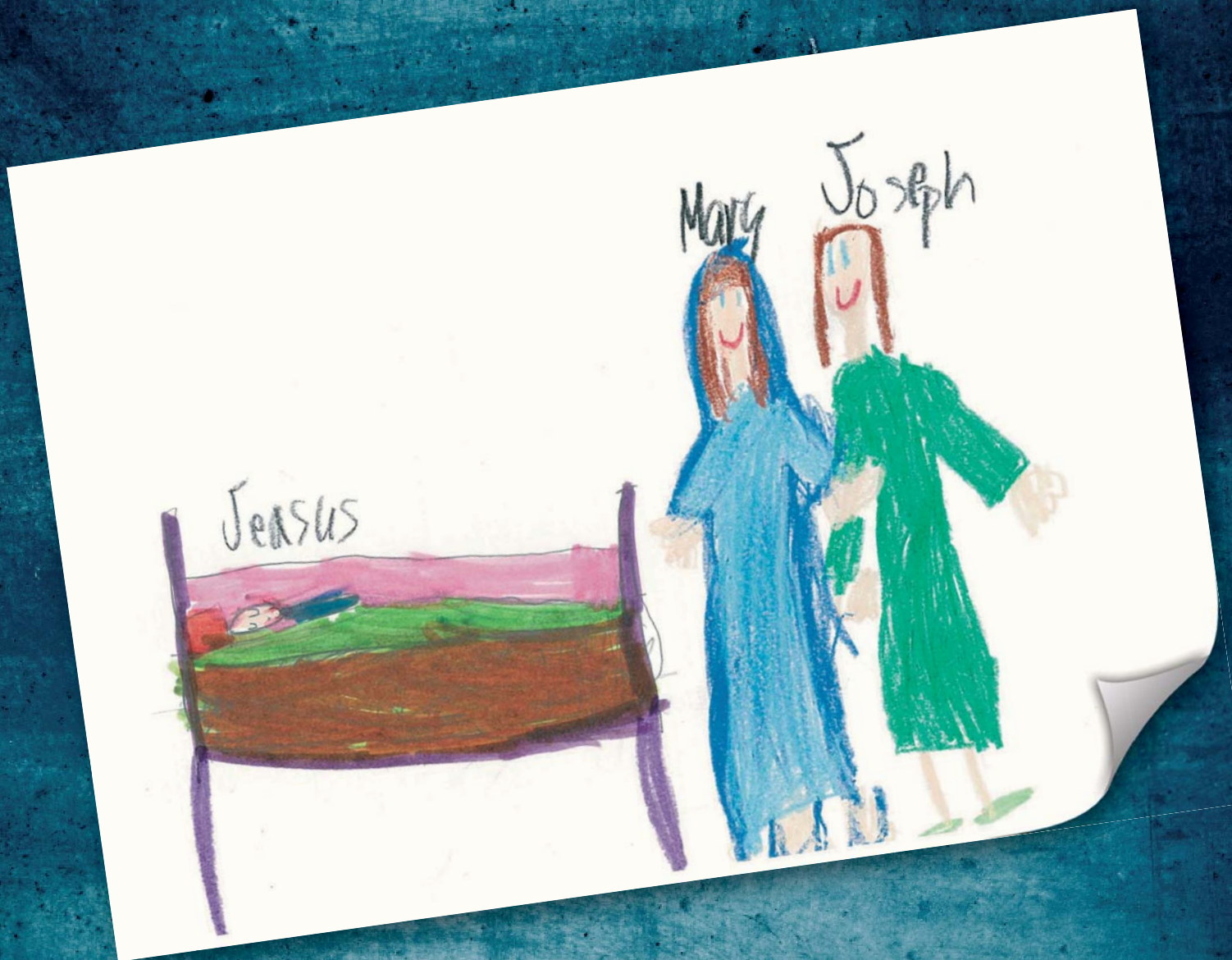
during Advent, you have had time to prepare. The prophet Micah in the reading today is about preparation; he tells of the coming of Jesus, with Jesus coming as a shepherd for all. The image of Jesus as shepherd, and we as his sheep, sits well with most people.

This Sunday we also read of the Visitation, from Luke's gospel. This is a piece of Scripture that most of us are familiar with, and as one of the Joyful mysteries of the Rosary, a story we may know well, from when we pray the Rosary. This story follows on from Mary finding out she is to be the mother of Jesus, and Elizabeth finding out she is to be the mother of John. Both women have been touched by the Holy Spirit. Mary is concerned for Elizabeth and goes to visit her, but it is Elizabeth who is filled with joy at the sight of Mary. This reading is about trust. Elizabeth, although quite old and unexpectedly pregnant, and Mary, to be the mother of Jesus, also, unexpectedly pregnant, are probably a little unsure about what has happened to them and what the months ahead hold. They are examples of great trust in God; they don't fully understand, but they have faith and trust in God. Often in our lives we are also at a point of indecision, questioning, bewilderment – we need to also have the same trust and faith that Mary and Elizabeth showed.

John was Jesus' greatest prophet. Even from when he was in the womb, he was aware of Jesus as the Scriptures tell us – “the baby in her womb leaped for joy”. Elizabeth calls Mary blessed, not only because she is to become the mother of Jesus, but also to show the incredible faith Mary had.

Let's pray as this Advent season draws to a close, that the revelation of God's love in Jesus becomes the model for all of us who believe in him.

Christmas



The French novelist Marcel Proust once said, “Sometimes the future lives in us without our knowing it.”

When we say, for example, that the Eucharist is a “pledge of future glory,” we are speaking about content, not chronology. We are talking not about the arrival of Santa Claus with a sleigh full of presents, but about a future that lives in us, powerfully, even when we can’t directly see or name or feel it. No wonder Christmas still holds such enormous power over our faith, our hearts and our imagination.

What God does in the birth of Jesus reveals, enacts and embodies our own future, for Christmas celebrates the “incomprehensible God” who comes “incomprehensibly near” to us.

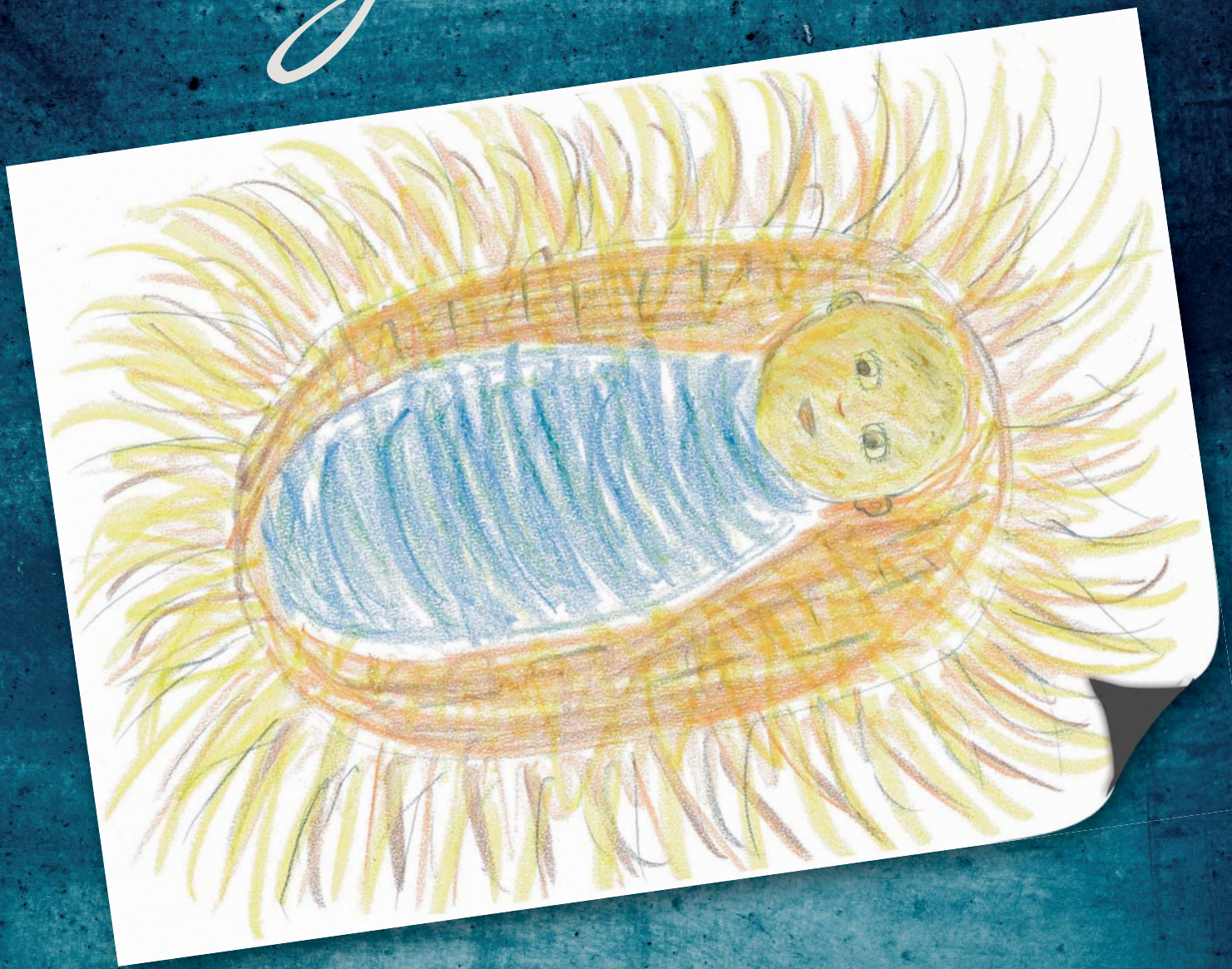
At Christmas, writes Karl Rahner, God says to us:

“I am there. I am with you. I am your life. I am your time. I am the gloom of your daily routine... I weep your tears - pour yours out to me, my child. I am your joy. Do not be afraid to be happy, for ever since I wept, joy is... more suitable than the anxiety and grief of those who think they have no hope... I am in the prison of your finiteness, for love has made me your prisoner... I am present in your needs, I have suffered them and they are now transformed, but not obliterated from my heart. I am in your lowest fall, for today I began to descend into hell. I am in your death, for today I began to die with you, because I was born, and I have not let myself be spared any real part of this death... I have sheltered, safely and completely, in the cold stable of your world. I am there. I no longer go away from this world, even if you do not see me now... I am there. It is Christmas. Light the candles. They have more right to exist than all the darkness. It is Christmas, Christmas that lasts forever.”

(Karl Rahner, *The Great Church Year*, ed. A. Raffelt, trans. H. Egan, New York: Crossroad, 1994, pp 51-52)

Amen! Maranatha! Come, Lord Jesus!

Christmas Day



Isaiah 52: 7-10

How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces peace, who brings good news, who announces salvation, who says to Zion, “Your God reigns.” Listen! Your sentinels lift up their voices, together they sing for joy; for in plain sight they see the return of the Lord to Zion. Break forth together into singing, you ruins of Jerusalem; for the Lord has comforted his people, he has redeemed Jerusalem. The Lord has bared his holy arm before the eyes of all the nations; and all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God.

Hebrews 1: 1-6

Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds. He is the reflection of God’s glory and the exact imprint of God’s very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word. When he had made purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs. For to which of the angels did God ever say, “You are my Son; today I have begotten you”? Or again, “I will be his Father, and he will be my Son”? And again, when he brings the firstborn into the world, he says, “Let all God’s angels worship him.”

John 1: 1-18

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people.

The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God. And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth.

(John testified to him and cried out, “This was he of whom I said, ‘He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me.’”) From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. The law indeed was given through Moses;

grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known.

Reflection

For us who believe and who celebrate the Word made flesh and dwelt among us as the source of life and light and truth, today is a renewal of our faith and of our commitment to the challenge of that word. Let us remember that because of the incarnation, we respond, not to a concept or an ideology or a philosophy, but to a living and loving person.

1. The good news of Christ proclaimed by the church in the pulpit must resound more loudly and more joyfully in the marketplace (Isaiah).
2. No longer through a glass darkly, but in the light of Christ, we behold the fullness of the Father's love (Hebrews).
3. In the word made flesh, God speaks the language of our flesh and blood, in the pulsing of our needs and aspirations and even in the shadows of our sinful darker side (John).

From the triumphant strains of Handel to the latest pop carol, Christmas is a day synonymous with music. Who wouldn't want to burst into song, even if they can't carry a tune, at the good news, the glad tidings?

It's back to the Table of the Lord and the table of our lives, overflowing with Christmas joy and the renewed promise of our salvation.

Lectio divina

A reading and reflection on the Scriptures which leads to prayer and transformation of life

Reading – getting to know the text (senses)

- Take in all the elements of the text.
- Be aware of context, related texts, quotes.
- Who are key characters; what are key words.
- Apply all that you know about the text.
- Don't choose any one thing to work with at this stage.

Meditation – engaging with the text, making it my own (reason)

What does the text tell me?

- about the God who speaks?
- about responding to that God?
- about my faith life?
- about what I need to do to transform my faith life?

Prayer – let prayer emerge from your working with the text (will)

- Our prayer stems from our reading / meditation.
- Meditation humbles us, so we turn to God in our need.
- We seek the grace we need to do what we must to transform our life.
- We acknowledge that alone we can do nothing.
- I can do all things in him who strengthens me

Action – throughout the day

- Now choose a word, phrase, sentence.
- Bring it to mind frequently during the day.
- Let it recapture the experience of your *lectio*.
- Use it especially in situations relating to your *lectio insight*.
- “Daily and hourly till the soil of the heart with the Gospel plough”.

Lectio divina (Guigo II)

Reading – getting to know the text (senses)

At this stage we come to know the text in its entirety. We look at it as a whole, embracing all the elements of it. What is the human author trying to tell in the text? This reading is the beginning of a process that leads to meditation, prayer and the transformation of life.

Meditation – engaging with the text, making it my own (reason)

Here we begin to reflect on the text. We approach the text not from its literal meaning, but from a theological point of view. What does it say about the God who speaks to me, and how I am to respond to that God. The text here acts like a mirror; it reveals to us our own faith journey and what we need to do to live it better.

Prayer – let prayer emerge from your working with the text (will)

Our prayer here arises out of meditation. We are humbled and have become aware of our need for God to help us. We pray for the grace to put into practice our insight into what we need to do to live our faith life more fully

Action – throughout the day

To help us throughout the day to focus on our particular insight we now choose a word, phrase or sentence. By repeating it during the day we are reminded of what we need to do, and remember that God gives to us the help that we need to do it. The goal of *lectio divina* is transformation of life, so this continuing repetition is like a leaven that brings about the transformation.

Shared *lectio* involves hearing the word together, sharing one's initial insights into the text, and then, after a private time for meditation, sharing something of those deeper reflections. After a time of prayer, the text chosen for daily reflection may also be shared.



Written by Bishop David L. Walker DD, with the support of the Australian Catholic Bishops Commission for Mission and Faith Formation and The Broken Bay Institute

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