

Friday (From a Sermon by Pope Leo the Great)

The Saviour was born: what a joy for us! This is no season for sadness, this, the birthday of Life – the Life which annihilates the fear of death and engenders joy. Nobody is an outsider to this happiness, for as our Lord found no one free from guilt when he came, so he came with redemption for all: let the sinner be filled with joy, for pardon is offered. When the time had come, God's son took our human nature upon himself in order to reconcile man to his creator. Let us offer thanksgiving to God the Father through his son. In giving life to Christ, he gave life to us too, so that in him we might be a new creation, a new work of his hands. O Christian, be aware of your nobility – it is God's own nature that you share. You have been rescued from the power of darkness, and have been transferred to the light of God, the Kingdom of God.

Scripture (Hebrews 1:1-)

At various times in the past and in various different ways, God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets; but in our own time, the last days, he has spoken to us through his Son, the Son that he has appointed to inherit everything and through whom he made everything there is. He is the radiant light of God's glory and the perfect copy of his nature, sustaining the universe by his powerful command; and now that he has destroyed the defilement of sin, he has gone to take his place in heaven at the right hand of divine Majesty.

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4th Week of Advent

Happiness is a humble heart.

The prophet Micah is able to look forward – with complete confidence – to a time when a new power would come, one which would change the world, (Micah 5:1-4), although the beginnings don't suggest power as the ruler will come from the lowly Bethlehem where 'she who is to give birth, gives birth'. If we aren't to lose Micah's sense that the infinite power of God is working through this baby, 'whose origin goes back to the distant past' and through whom God will rule and his power will extend to the ends of the earth. we perhaps have to look beyond the comfortable Nativity scenes and carols which portray sweet baby Jesus lying peacefully in a manger, cared for by an equally serene Mary. Perhaps the key to the Incarnation is humility, which is essential to God's plans – not because he demands subservience (humility is not in the sense of 'eating humble pie'), but because it allows us to be free of the pride which limits us when we say 'we can go it alone.' Humble servants allow God to work in and through them, in partnership, and so achieve so much more than our human limitations could dream of. Mary's Magnificat, (Lk1:46-55) is essential Christmas reading and, in this respect, I think that Mary's 'Be it done unto me according to your will' which allows Jesus to be born, is the crucial step Mary took, and deserves at least as much emphasis as her virginity. It is essentially the same prayer as Jesus in Gethsemane which leads to his death and Resurrection, and so to the fulfilment of God's plans for us.

The fruits of Mary's 'yes' are first seen when Mary visits Elizabeth, (Luke 1:39-46), a meeting which brings the two unborn babies together. When John leaps in the womb, the Holy Spirit enables Elizabeth to understand that her son has recognised the Lord, and his joy is because God is now fulfilling his promises, which go back to the distant past. Her prayer also recognises the crucial role of Mary and that she is 'blessed' because she believed that God's promise will be fulfilled: this young girl whose ordinary day was interrupted by the angel saying that she will not only conceive a child by the power of the Holy Spirit, but also that the child is the one through whom the whole of history will be brought to fulfilment would have so many reasons for saying 'I think you have the wrong person: all of this is beyond my capabilities', but her 'yes' was the powerful humility which allowed it all to happen.

Paul's Letter to the Hebrews brings us into the Christmas story. In teaching that obedience to God's will is far superior to the sacrifices and holocaust-based religion of the Old Covenant, Paul points us to the new relationship which Jesus made possible. The root meaning of 'obey' is 'to listen', so Paul is saying that God doesn't want us to 'pay him' with sacrifices, but to listen to – and respond, ('Here I am, I come to do your will') in a relationship which isn't based on fear, but on God's powerful and ridiculously generous love. Obedience is not in the sense of in case I am punished but so I can become the person God has in mind. The first example of how this changes life is the shepherds: the transformation in them when they return to their fields is the Christmas message – these outcasts are no longer rejected as worthless but joyfully praising God. In choosing them to be the first to hear, we can see that this salvation is for now, and it is freely given: they had done nothing to earn it, other than respond joyfully to the news of Immanuel, God-is-with-us. Have a long and joyful Christmas. Martin Bennett

Monday (Caryll Houselander)

I think the most moving fact in the whole history of mankind is that wherever the Holy Spirit has desired to renew the face of the earth he has chosen to do so through communion with some humble little human creature. This is something which could happen to everyone now, but it could not have happened to anyone but for the fiat of the peasant girl in Nazareth whom the whole world calls Our Lady. In the virginal emptiness of Mary of Nazareth, Christ was conceived. The whole world trembled on her consent. She was asked to surrender her littleness to the Infinite Love, and as a result to become the Mother of Christ. She was not asked to do anything herself, but to let something be done to her. She was not asked to renounce anything, but to receive an incredible gift.

Scripture (Luke 1:32-38)

The angel Gabriel said to Mary, 'Rejoice, you who enjoy God's favour! The Lord is with you.' She was deeply disturbed by these words, but the angel said, 'Do not be afraid, you have won God's favour. Look! You are to conceive and bear a son, and you must name him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High.' Mary said, 'But how can this come about, since I am a virgin.' The angel answered, 'The Holy spirit will come upon you.' Mary said, 'I am the handmaid of the Lord, let what you have said be done to me.'

Tuesday (A Carthusian monk)

Believe, then, that in this topsy-turvy world in which we have to live, in this world so bereft of peace and so far from God, GOD IS PRESENT: loving, giving himself, pouring his peace into souls of good will. Believe this, I say, not trying to understand it nor seeking to feel it. For to believe is precisely to give one's assent to a word without understanding or feeling. Believe: and that very Word, the Word of God, will transform us into himself, and make us partakers in his life.

Scripture (Titus 3:4-7)

When the kindness and love of God our Saviour for mankind were revealed, it was not because of any upright actions we had done ourselves; it was for no reason except his own faithful love that he saved us, by means of the cleansing waters of rebirth and renewal in the Holy Spirit which he has so generously poured over us through Jesus Christ our Saviour; so that, justified by his grace, we should become heirs in hope of eternal life.

Wednesday (Metropolitan Anthony of Sourozh)

To understand the meaning of the saving death of Christ, we must understand the meaning of the incarnation. Eternity is not something - it is someone. Eternity is God himself. The birth of the Son of God is unlike ours. His birth is not the beginning life, of an ever growing life; it is the limitation of the fullness that was his before the world began. He who possessed eternal glory with the Father, before all ages, enters into our world, wherein we have brought sin, suffering, death. He accepts all that is inherent in our condition and the first day of his life on earth is the first day of his ascent to the cross.

Scripture (John 1:1,9-12,14)

In the beginning was the Word: the Word was with God and the Word was God. The Word was the real light that gives light to everyone: he was coming into the world. He was in the world that had come into being through him, and the world did not recognise him. He came to his own and his own people did not accept him. But to those who did accept him he gave power to become children of God. The Word became flesh and lived among us, and we saw his glory, the glory that he has from the Father as the only Son of the Father.

Thursday (Oscar Romero)

With Christ, God injected himself into history. With the birth of Christ, God's reign is now inaugurated in human time. Every year we recall that God's reign is now in this world. His birth attests that God is now marching with us in history, that we do not go alone. Humans long for peace, for justice, for a reign of divine law, for something holy, for what is far from earth's realities. We can have such a hope, not because we ourselves are able to construct the realm of happiness that God's holy words proclaim, but because the builder of a reign of justice, of love, and of peace is already in the midst of us.

Scripture (Micah 5:1-4)

The Lord says this: You, Bethlehem, the least of the clans of Judah, out of you will be born for me the one who is to rule over Israel; his origin goes back to the distant past, to the days of old. When she who is to give birth gives birth, the remnant of his brothers will come back to the sons of Israel. He will stand and feed his flock with the power of the Lord, with the majesty of the name of his God. They will live secure, for from then on he will extend his power to the ends of the land. He himself will be peace.