



*Madonna and Child*, by Giovanni Battista Salvi (1609-1685)

## THE ADVENT OF CHRIST

### *Scripture Reflections to Prepare for Christmas*

#### **Introduction**

This Advent, we are invited to put ourselves into the Jewish world of the first century and discover the spiritual treasures that are packed into practically every line of the gospel accounts of Matthew and Luke (the two gospels that provide the narratives about our Lord's birth). As we do this, our prayer is that this Advent experience will give us a new perspective about the dawn of the Messiah, the Christ.

A booklet containing daily devotions will be published for each week of Advent, and at the end of each daily meditation, a point for reflection and a short prayer will be provided.

#### **Week 1**

#### **Setting the Stage: The Prophecies and the Hope**

##### *The First Sunday of Advent - The New Elijah*

**'But the angel said to him, "Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer is heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John. And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth.'" Luke 1. 13-14**

What is most interesting about this scene is not simply that Zechariah and Elizabeth finally will be blessed with a child. This child will bring blessings not only to his parents, but to all of the people, for John the Baptist will be one of the most important prophets ever sent to Israel.

The importance of John's prophetic ministry is seen in the final words that the angel uses to describe this child: 'He will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared' (Luke 1. 16-17).

These verses echo the last prophetic words of the Old Testament, where Malachi announces that the Lord one day would come to redeem Israel and that he would send his messenger to prepare the people for his arrival (Malachi 3. 1), and this messenger would be like a new Elijah: 'Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet...and he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers' (Malachi 4. 5-6).

In light of this Old Testament background, the angel describes John's ministry as the fulfilment of Malachi's prophecy. He will be the new Elijah, preparing the people of Israel for the Lord's coming, which will bring about the reconciliation of families to God and families to each other.

And so this story is not simply about God's intervening to bless a pious Jewish couple with a child. Rather, the story is *representative of the story of Israel*.

Just as Zechariah and Elizabeth are barren and hope for God to show favour by blessing them with a child, so too the Jews suffer and long for God to show them favour again by visiting his people. God will respond to Zechariah and Elizabeth's desires for a child in a way that answers the needs of all the Jewish people: by sending them a son who will prepare the way for the coming of the Lord and the restoration of Israel.

### **For Reflection**

What are some things I can do each day this Advent to prepare spiritually for Christmas?

### **Prayer**

Dear Lord, I pray that I will not take Christ's birth for granted. In these four weeks of Advent, prepare my heart for your coming this Christmas. Amen.

### ***Monday of Advent 1 - 'I am Gabriel'***

'And Zechariah said to the angel, "How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years." And the angel answered him, "I am Gabriel, who stand in the presence of God; and I was sent to speak to you, and to bring you this good news.'" *Luke 1. 18-19*

Zechariah's question seems reasonable enough to us. But the angel gives a mystifying response: 'I am Gabriel'. Zechariah did not ask for the angel's name; he asked for assurances!

Yet the angel Gabriel knew what he was doing. Revealing his name was significant, because the only time Gabriel is mentioned in the Old Testament is in the important visions given to the prophet Daniel. In Daniel 9, the prophet was praying for God to show mercy on his people and bring an end to the Jewish sufferings under foreign oppressors. In the middle of Daniel's prayer, the angel Gabriel appeared to him at the hour of the evening sacrifice, the time when incense would have been offered in the temple.

Gabriel delivered a message of good news and bad news to Daniel. On one hand, the people would continue to suffer under pagan nations for a long time to come. On the other hand, at the end of this period of suffering, God would send an anointed prince (the Messiah) to bring an end to sin and atone for iniquity. This anointed one would usher in everlasting righteousness and bring all of Israel's prophecies to fulfilment (Daniel 9. 24-27).

The parallels between what happened to Daniel and what happened to Zechariah are striking: like Daniel, Zechariah *prays on behalf of Israel* as he offers the incense in the temple (Luke 1. 9). Like Daniel, Zechariah makes this prayer *at the hour of the temple sacrifice* (Luke 1. 10). And in the middle of Zechariah's liturgical service, the same angel (*Gabriel*) appears (Luke 1. 11, 19).

So Gabriel is revealing much more than his name. He is subtly announcing that Daniel 9 is finally coming to fulfilment, and *Zechariah's own son* is going to play a key part in preparing people for the long-awaited 'anointed one'.

### **For Reflection**

How do I respond when God answers prayer in ways I don't expect?

### **Prayer**

Dear God, as Gabriel did with Zechariah, often you answer my questions with answers I don't fully understand. But I trust you and your purposes. During this Advent season, help me to see your larger picture for my life. Amen.

### ***Tuesday of Advent 1 - Great Beginnings***

**The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham. *Matthew 1. 1***

Matthew's first words bring us all the way back to the beginning of the Bible, the book of Genesis. Matthew 1. 1 can be translated literally, 'The *book of the genesis*

of Jesus Christ.' This is significant because similar expressions were used in Genesis to announce great beginnings.

For example, a similar formula was used to sum up the story of how God created the universe: 'These are the generations of the heavens and the earth when they were created' (Genesis 2. 4). This formula was also used to introduce the family tree of our first parents, Adam and Eve: 'the book of the generations of Adam' (Genesis 5. 1). In Genesis 10. 1, the same phrase introduces the genealogy of Noah's family, the new human family who survived after the flood.

In each of these cases - Adam and creation, Noah and the flood - the phrase 'the book of the genealogy' signals a significant starting point in God's plan for humanity. By opening his gospel with these words, Matthew announces that another new beginning is here. The child at the end of this genealogy will bring about a new genesis: the renewal of all humanity and the restoration of the entire created order to harmony with God.

### **For Reflection**

What new things does God want to do in my life during these weeks of Advent?

### **Prayer**

Dear Jesus, prepare my heart to welcome you. Open my eyes to recognise that you will be born anew in me, and show me how to make room for you. Amen.

## ***Wednesday of Advent 1 - Worldwide Blessing***

**Jesus Christ...the son of Abraham. *Matthew 1. 1***

We dwell on this first verse of Matthew's genealogy to consider the description of Jesus as 'the son of Abraham'. For an ancient Israelite, such a description meant a lot more than being a physical descendant of this great patriarch. Being a son of Abraham is at the very heart of the Israelite national identity.

God promised Abraham that his descendants one day would become a great *nation* (Genesis 12. 2, 15. 8) and that *kings* would eventually come forth from Abraham's line (Genesis 17. 6, 16). Jews in the first century would have seen that these two promises already were fulfilled when Israel became a *nation* in the time of Moses and a *kingdom* in the time of David.

However, there was one promise made to Abraham that had yet to be fulfilled, and it was the greatest promise of all. In response to Abraham's faithfulness, God swore that Abraham's descendants would eventually serve as *an instrument to bring blessing to all the peoples of the world*: 'And by your descendants shall all

the nations of the earth bless themselves, because you have obeyed my voice' (Genesis 22. 18). This third promise gave rise to the Jewish belief that one day, people from all pagan nations would come to worship the one true God and be united with Israel in one covenant family.

By tracing Jesus's lineage specifically to Abraham, Matthew is drawing our attention to this worldwide mission of Israel. And such an allusion might stir hope that the child at the end of the genealogy will be the one to fulfil the long-awaited third promise and bring blessing to the entire human family.

### **For Reflection**

How might I become an instrument for God to extend his blessing to others in the world?

### **Prayer**

God, I sometimes get so caught up in my own life that I become blind to the needs of those around me. Open my eyes this Advent to see how my life fits into the larger story of your plan for the human family. Amen.

### *Thursday of Advent 1 - Son of David*

**Jesse (was) the father of David the king.**

**And David was the father of Solomon. *Matthew 1. 6***

Our journey through Jesus's genealogy now brings us to the great king David. A first-century Jew reading about 'David the king' and his son Solomon certainly would recall the glory days of the kingdom of Israel. These men were the royal heroes of old who brought Israel to its greatest moment in history. In the time of David and Solomon, three important symbols of Israel's national identity - the land, the king and the temple - shined most brightly.

Firstly, the Promised Land was like a new Eden, the home for the covenant family of God. It was the place where the Lord would bestow blessings on his people and one day gather the pagan nations to himself. This sacred Promised Land was secured for Israel under the leadership of David and Solomon.

Secondly, the kingdom was based on a covenant that God made with David's family, and it had a universal scope. God promised an everlasting dynasty that would extend to the ends of the earth. This dynasty was founded on King David and his son Solomon.

Thirdly, the temple in Jerusalem was not just a place of worship; the Jews believed that the one true God who created the entire cosmos dwelt in a unique way with the Jewish people in this sacred spot. David envisioned the need for

the temple of the Lord, and Solomon built it in Jerusalem.

So when a first-century Jew would read about David and Solomon, this would bring to mind the highest point in Israel's history, the times when Israel had the land, had a king and had God dwelling among them in the temple.

### **For Reflection**

What 'glory days' in my life can I remember? How have they shaped me and my faith?

### **Prayer**

Dear Jesus, thank you for the moments when, like Israel under David and Solomon, I have experienced the blessings of your reign in my life and an awareness of your presence in my heart. Amen.

### ***Friday of Advent 1 - Hope of the Nation***

**Josiah (was) the father of Jechoniah and his brothers, at the time of the deportation to Babylon. *Matthew 1. 11***

Now we come to the most sombre note in Jesus's genealogy, recalling the tragic events of 586 BC. This verse brings to mind all that the Jews lost when Babylon invaded Jerusalem and carried the people away into exile. This was the moment when Israel lost three great symbols of its national identity: the land, the king and the temple.

Israel was still suffering the consequences of this tragedy at the time of Jesus's birth. The Jews still did not have control over their land. They still did not have a son of David to rule them. And they were still longing for God's presence to be with them again in the temple.

Nevertheless, God offered the Jewish people hope in the midst of their sufferings. Through the prophets, he announced that one day he would send a new royal descendant of David, a new anointed king called 'the Messiah' (meaning 'anointed one'). This Messiah-King would usher in a new era in which the Jews would regain the land; the kingdom would be restored to its former glory; and God's presence would return to Israel.

Matthew's gospel calls upon those hopes when it introduces a man named Zerubbabel, who stands as a turning point in the genealogy:

'And after the deportation to Babylon: Jechoniah was the father of Shealtiel, and Shealtiel the father of Zerubbabel, and Zerubbabel the father of Abiud, and Abiud the father of Eliakim, and Eliakim the father of Azor, and Azor the father

of Zadok, and Zadok the father of Achim, and Achim the father of Eliud, and Eliud the father of Eleazar, and Eleazar the father of Matthan, and Matthan the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Joseph' (Matthew 1. 12-16).

As one of the leaders in the rebuilding of Jerusalem in 515 BC, Zerubbabel represents the last Davidic descendant in Matthew's genealogy for which there is any public record in the Jewish scriptures (see the book of Ezra). What happened to the sons of David from this period all the way up to the time of Jesus remained somewhat of a mystery.

This is what would make verses 13 through 16 so exciting to the original hearers of Matthew's gospel: the royal line has continued for many generations after Zerubbabel! With each new name, Matthew's genealogy introduces another Davidic descendant previously unknown in the Hebrew scriptures. The genealogy thus picks up momentum in these verses, building hope that at the end of this family tree, we might find that ultimate son of David whom the prophets foretold would return Israel to its former glory.

### **For Reflection**

Are there areas of my life where I am 'exiled from God'? How can I return to him?

### **Prayer**

God, sometimes I get so focussed on the troubles in my life - at work, with my family, in my relationships - that I can almost forget the deepest problem you want to address in me: my sin. Help me this Advent to return to you and to be liberated from my sins. Amen.

### ***Saturday of Advent 1 - The Return of the King***

**Jacob (was) the father of Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called Christ. *Matthew 1. 16***

Finally the genealogy's rushing crescendo reaches its peak. Here the royal line culminates with the child who will bring Israel's history to its ultimate destination.

The significance of the child can be seen in the three titles that he receives in this opening chapter of Matthew's gospel: Jesus, Christ and Emmanuel (Matthew 1. 23). Perhaps one could see in these three names hope that the three Jewish symbols that were shattered in the exile would now be restored: the land, the king and God's presence in the temple.

Firstly, in Hebrew the name Jesus means 'God saves'. This is significant because,

according to the Jewish scriptures, it was Israel's sin that led to its losing the Promised Land. Sin led to the exile. The deepest problem that Israel faced was not its exile from the land, but from God. This child Jesus has come to save Israel not from the Roman forces occupying their land, but from the much deeper oppression of their sin.

It is also significant that the child's name, Jesus, is a shortened form of the name Joshua. This might recall the famous Old Testament Joshua, Moses's successor, who brought the Exodus story to its climax by guiding the people into the Promised Land. Just as the Joshua of old led Israel out of the desert wilderness and into the land, so now Jesus (the new Joshua) will lead the people out of their spiritual exile from God and into the true Promised Land of heaven.

Secondly, Jesus is given the royal title 'Christ' (1. 16). In the New Testament, the Greek word *christos* was commonly used as a translation of the Hebrew word *messiah* ('anointed one'). This was the title for the future son of David, whom the prophets said would restore the dynasty and bring to fulfilment the promises about a worldwide, everlasting kingdom. Matthew's genealogy joyfully proclaims that Jesus is that Messiah-King, the first Davidic Son to reign in over five centuries, and the one who will restore the kingdom to Israel.

Finally, perhaps the most profound title given to Jesus comes at the end of Matthew's opening chapter. In Matthew 1. 23, Jesus is called 'Emmanuel', which means 'God with us'.

God's visible presence had not dwelt in the temple for more than five hundred years. Without a king, without control of their land, and especially without the glory of the Lord dwelling among them, the Jews in the first century might have felt somewhat abandoned. They would have been longing for God to be with them again.

In the midst of this uncertainty, Matthew announces that the child at the end of the genealogy is 'Emmanuel'. In other words, God is with his people again. What is most astonishing, however, is that God is with his people as never before. Now the God of the universe actually dwells among them in the person of Jesus Christ.

### **For Reflection**

How do I know that God is with me today?

### **Prayer**

Jesus Christ, Emmanuel, thank you for coming into the world. Help me this Advent to be more aware of your presence in my life each day. Amen.