



*Madonna with Child*, by Ambrogio Bergognone (1470-1523)

## 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 2**

#### **Serving God's Plan: Joseph, Zechariah, John the Baptist**

#### ***The Second Sunday of Advent - Humble Royalty***

**In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. *Luke 1. 26-27***

We have already noted that Matthew's genealogy presents Joseph, the husband of Mary, as coming from the house of David. Here we see that Luke also presents the fact that Joseph is part of this most famous family in Israel.

One might expect being a part of the Davidic dynasty to be a great privilege and honour in ancient Jewish culture. After all, it was David who was promised by

God an everlasting kingdom (2 Samuel 7), and it was David's descendants who ruled God's people for hundreds of years from the throne in Jerusalem (1 and 2 Kings). Yet David's great dynasty seemed to come to a tragic halt in 586 BC, when the foreign armies of Babylon invaded Jerusalem, destroyed the temple and carried the Jews away into exile. For most of the six centuries that followed, one foreign nation after another ruled over the Jews in Palestine.

In the time of Mary and Joseph, the Jews are suffering under Roman occupation. In such oppressive conditions, being a member of David's family no longer holds the privileges, authority and honour that it held in the glory days of the kings who reigned in Jerusalem. The Joseph 'of the house of David' is a humble carpenter, leading a quiet, ordinary life in the small town of Nazareth.

Still God remembers the words he spoke to David at the beginning of his kingship in Jerusalem:

'I will make for you a *great* name...I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come forth from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish *the throne of his kingdom for ever*. *I will be his father, and he shall be my son...*And your house and your *kingdom shall be made sure for ever* before me, your *throne shall be established for ever*' (2 Samuel 7. 9, 12-14, 16, emphasis added).

It is from the house of David, however humble it has become in Joseph's day, that the Messiah will come to Israel.

### **For Reflection**

How might the example of the Lord's fidelity to the house of David strengthen my trust in God's care for my life?

### **Prayer**

Lord, thank you for your faithfulness to your promises throughout the generations. I know that you will always be faithful to me. Help me to be always faithful to you. Amen.

### ***Monday of Advent 2 - Joseph: Silent Knight, Holy Knight***

**When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child of the Holy Spirit; and her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to send her away quietly. But as he considered this, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, 'Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit.'**  
*Matthew 1. 18-20*

In this scene we catch a glimpse into the soul of this mysterious man, Joseph. What is Joseph planning to do? What does it mean to 'send her away quietly'? And why does he want to do it?

One interpretation of this passage holds that Joseph learns of Mary's pregnancy and assumes that she has committed adultery, since he knows that the child is not his. Joseph is a 'just man', and in the end he decides to divorce her secretly in order to spare Mary the severe punishment of the law. This was the view of the Church Fathers such as John Chrysostom, Ambrose and Augustine.

A second interpretation holds that Joseph already has knowledge that Mary has conceived by the Holy Spirit. Saints Ephraim, Basil, Bernard and Thomas Aquinas were of this mind-set. Realising that God is working in Mary's life in a profound way, Joseph feels inadequate to serve as Mary's husband. He desires to release her from the obligation of marriage because of his reverence for the extraordinary work that God is doing in her life.

A third interpretation views Joseph as simply not knowing what to think about Mary's pregnancy. He knows that Mary is with child, and he knows that the baby is not his. At the same time, he is certain that Mary has remained faithful to him. Joseph remains in this dilemma until the angel comes to explain where the baby comes from: the Holy Spirit.

Whatever interior drama Joseph may have been experiencing before the angel appeared to him, his response to the angel's message was immediate, strong and decisive. 'When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him' (Matthew 1. 24). He did not fear any longer to take Mary as his wife.

### **For Reflection**

How do I deal with troubling dilemmas in my life? Do I wait to hear from the Lord before taking action?

### **Prayer**

Saint Joseph, may I learn from your example of wholehearted dedication to God and his plan, even if initially I do not understand its purpose. Amen.

### ***Tuesday of Advent 2 - Old Joseph, New Joseph***

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

In the opening chapters of the first gospel, Joseph seems to replay the life of another famous Joseph in the Bible, Joseph the patriarch from the book of

Genesis. There are numerous parallels between these two great men.

Firstly, they not only are both called Joseph, but even their fathers share a common name, Jacob (Genesis 37. 2-3). Secondly, both are persecuted. Joseph's brothers sell him into slavery, and King Herod tries to kill Joseph's 'foster' son Jesus. Thirdly, both end up in Egypt as a result of their persecution. Joseph of old becomes a slave in Egypt, whilst New Testament Joseph travels there in order to flee from Herod's terror.

Fourthly, both Josephs are famous for their dreams. Joseph the patriarch is well-known for his dreams and for interpreting other people's dreams. As for Joseph in Matthew's gospel, it seems that every scene with him involves an angel of the Lord appearing to him in a dream and telling him to do something or to go somewhere. Poor Joseph does not seem to get much sleep!

Fifthly, both Josephs were known for their purity. The most famous virtue of Joseph the patriarch was his chastity, stemming from his steadfast purity while facing the temptation of Potiphar's wife. According to Catholic tradition, Mary and Joseph remained celibate throughout the entirety of their marriage. Fittingly, Joseph has often been called Mary's 'most chaste spouse'.

Sixthly, both Josephs are known for their role as the protector and rescuer of their families. Joseph of old ends up saving his family from starvation, whilst Joseph of the New Testament protects his family from the murderous plot of Herod.

### **For Reflection**

This Advent, how might I fully entrust myself to the care of God?

### **Prayer**

Dear God, I pray that you would protect my family, my parish and the Church in the world. Amen.

### ***Wednesday of Advent 2 - Zechariah's Second Chance***

Now the time came for Elizabeth to be delivered, and she gave birth to a son. And her neighbours and kinsfolk heard that the Lord had shown great mercy to her, and they rejoiced with her. And on the eighth day they came to circumcise the child; and they would have him named Zechariah after his father, but his mother said, 'Not so, he shall be called John'...And they made signs to the father, inquiring what he would have him called. And he asked for a writing tablet, and wrote, 'His name is John'...And immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue loosed, and he spoke, blessing God.

*Luke 1. 57-60, 62-64*

The birth of his son John the Baptist is a crucial moment for Zechariah; it is the first time we see him co-operating with the Lord's plan as revealed by Gabriel. In the temple, Zechariah responded to the angel's message with doubt. Now, after nine quiet months to consider the angel's words and witness their fulfilment, Zechariah has come to greater faith. He obeys the angel's command and names the child John. As soon as he does this, his punishment comes to an end. His mouth is 'immediately' opened, and he can speak again.

Those present sense God's hand in these events. In awe, they recognise that they are caught up in something much larger than the circumcision and naming of this child. God must have some special purpose for this new-born. The fear of the Lord comes on them, and they wonder, 'What then will this child be?' (Luke 1. 66).

### **For Reflection**

What is one area of my life right now where I wish I had a second chance (in the way I treated someone, or in a choice I made, or in a failure to do something good)? What can I do to get this area of my life back on the right path?

### **Prayer**

Lord, thank you for the second chances you give your people. You are always ready to strengthen, heal and guide us by your Holy Spirit. Help us to hear your directives and to respond even more faithfully. Amen.

### ***Thursday of Advent 2 - Benedictus***

**And his father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied, saying, 'Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has visited and redeemed his people.' Luke 1. 67-68**

Zechariah uses his newfound speech to thank God in a hymn-like prayer that has come to be known as the *Benedictus* (the translation of the first word in Latin of his praise, 'Blessed'). This is the second canticle in Luke's gospel and, like Mary's song (the *Magnificat*) in Luke 1. 46-55, the *Benedictus* serves as a pause in the narrative, giving the reader a chance to reflect on the saving events that are taking place.

The language that Zechariah uses in this hymn of praise would have stirred up much hope in the hearts of his neighbours and relatives listening that day. If we were there, we would hear in Zechariah's song an announcement that the history of the world has reached a decisive turning point and that God is about to act in our lives in a most dramatic fashion.

The first thing that might capture people's attention is Zechariah's proclamation

that God has 'visited' his people. This language is not about God stopping by to say hello. Rather, the depiction of God 'visiting' his people served as a powerful image in the Old Testament to describe how the Lord mercifully looked upon his people's sufferings and freed them from their afflictions (Genesis 21. 1; Exodus 4. 31; Ruth 1. 6; Psalm 80. 14, 106. 4).

For example, when God 'visited' the Israelites during their slavery in Egypt, he looked upon their hardships and then sent Moses to deliver them from their foes (Exodus 4. 31). Now in the *Benedictus*, Zechariah is announcing similar astonishing news. God has 'visited' his people again. In other words, the same saving hand that rescued Israel from the Egyptians is, in some sense, about to save the nation from its current hardships under Roman rule.

A second amazing point from Zechariah's canticle is his saying that God has 'redeemed' his people. The term *redeem* originally was used to describe the Jewish custom of buying back something that once was one's own, but had fallen into the hands of another. The word in fact means 'to buy back'.

The Old Testament came to use redemption imagery spiritually, to depict God's activity of freeing his people from their enemies. In fact, the redemption story *par excellence* was the Exodus, when the Lord 'bought back' the Israelites from slavery, releasing them from their oppression in Egypt.

What is most significant about the word redemption is that prophets such as Isaiah spoke of the Lord's performing another great act of redemption for his people in the future. The prophets foretold that one day God would redeem the Jews from their current enemies, as he freed their ancestors from Pharaoh in the first Exodus (Isaiah 43. 1; 44. 22-23; 52. 9).

After hundreds of years of foreign domination, Jews in the time of Zechariah would be longing for this new exodus to arrive. They would be yearning for God to fulfil the prophecies and 'buy them back' from their oppression. Therefore when Zechariah speaks of God's *redeeming* his people, he is proclaiming that the long-awaited exodus is finally here.

### **For Reflection**

How might God want to 'visit' me with his saving hand as he did the ancient Israelites? From what might he want to redeem me?

### **Prayer**

Lord of the universe, thank you for never giving up your pursuit of human hearts. Thank you for your faithfulness. Help me to be open to your 'visits'. Amen.

## *Friday of Advent 2 - A Horn of Salvation*

**The Lord God of Israel...has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David. *Luke 1. 68, 69***

Here Zechariah's song reaches a climactic point. These words would have signalled that God is now sending his much-anticipated Messiah to restore the kingdom to Israel.

In the ancient Near East, the horn was a symbol of strength. However, when Zechariah speaks of a horn rising *in the house of his servant David*, he has a very specific power in mind: the strength of a new King coming from the Davidic dynasty. In fact, Zechariah's words echo the royal hymn of Psalm 132, which celebrated God's covenant with King David and his descendants: 'I will make a horn to sprout for David; I have prepared a lamp for my anointed' (Psalm 132. 7).

What kind of salvation will this Messiah bring? The emphasis in the first half of Zechariah's song appears to be on a military or political liberation. Zechariah portrays this salvation in terms of the Israelites being 'saved from our enemies, and from the hand of all who hate us' (Luke 1. 71). For many Jews in Zechariah's day, 'our enemies' and 'all who hate us' easily would be identified as Rome, Herod, and all those in league with these first-century oppressors of the Jewish people.

However, we will clearly see in the second half of the *Benedictus* that the new Davidic King will not be leading a political revolution or military takeover. Instead, he comes to offer a much more profound type of liberation, a spiritual one that will enable us to truly 'serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before him all the days of our life' (Luke 1. 74-75).

### **For Reflection**

What bonds keep me from a life of joy and holiness in the power of the Holy Spirit?

### **Prayer**

Lord Jesus, you set us free from all the snares of the world, the flesh and the devil. Help me to live in that freedom by rejecting these snares and by following you faithfully. Amen.

## *Saturday of Advent 2 - True Freedom*

**And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of his salvation to his people in the forgiveness of their sins. *Luke 1. 76-77***

These verses represent Zechariah's first words to his eight day-old son. Here, he finally proclaims what the angel Gabriel told him privately in the inner courts of the temple nine months ago: his son will be Israel's last and greatest prophet, the one who will prepare the way of the Lord.

Zechariah goes on to say that John the Baptist's mission as the Messiah's forerunner is to give people 'knowledge of salvation'. And he makes clear that this salvation will not be found in political action or military manoeuvres, but 'in the forgiveness of their sins'. This is the first time in Luke's gospel that God's plan of salvation for Israel is specifically linked with the forgiveness of sins.

Zechariah's song reminds all of us that we should see the suffering of the world not only on a political or social level, but primarily on a spiritual one. The root problem for all social injustices lies in the hearts of men and women, and it is this spiritual illness that God wants to treat.

The next time Zechariah's son appears in Luke's gospel, he will be grown up and already out in the wilderness, preparing the way of the Lord. He will be 'preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins' (Luke 3. 3), just as his father foretells in the *Benedictus*.

### **For Reflection**

What are the roots of today's social ills? What should change in my heart so that I can be more of an instrument of Christ's love in our broken world?

### **Prayer**

Lord, I repent of all my sin and come to you for forgiveness. Purify my heart, that I might 'serve you without fear'. Amen.