



St Peter's Basilica in Rome

Traditionally, pilgrims in Rome visit the seven pilgrim churches: the four major Basilicas (St Peter in Vatican, St Paul outside the Walls, St John in Lateran and Santa Maria Maggiore), while the other three are *San Lorenzo fuori le mura*, *Santa Croce in Gerusalemme* and *San Sebastiano fuori le mura*.

AN ADVENT PILGRIMAGE

Daily Reflections and Prayers for Advent

WEEK ONE

Introduction

This Advent we are invited to set out on a pilgrimage, a journey towards a renewed and deeper encounter with God. A pilgrimage is essentially something active, something to be done, not simply something to be read about. So each day there will be things to do: prayer exercises to try out, reflections to undertake, gifts to ask from God. We are not alone on our journey. We are accompanied by many who have, throughout the centuries, set out on their own faith journeys. Let us set out together; and may God be with us on the road.

Week 1

The First Sunday of Advent - Setting Out

A gift to ask from God

As we set out on this Advent journey, we ask God for the gift of being able to recognise the different ways in which God will be with us during the coming month.

A reflection for the road

'A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step.' This saying, attributed to the Chinese philosopher Lao-tzu who was born six hundred years before Christ, can serve as an encouragement to set out upon this Advent journey.

Journeys often begin with uncertainty. Am I sure that I know the way to my destination? Have I forgotten to bring anything I will need? Am I setting out too early, or too late? There is something about stepping outside, closing the door behind me and taking those first few steps along the road that has the power to quell many of those fears. Now I am ready to face whatever and whomever I meet, day by day, without spending too long looking behind or ahead.

Can you remember a time when you set out on a journey with an uncertain future? You might think of moving from one place to another, or launching into a new job, a new relationship or a new phase of your life. What was it like to set out in this way? What were some of your hopes and some of your fears? Are there any possibilities of new journeys beckoning you forward in your life at the moment?

Scripture to accompany us

Mary has been visited by the angel Gabriel, who tells her that she is to give birth to God's Son. She is also told that her cousin, Elizabeth, thought to be too old to have children, is herself six months pregnant. So Mary decides to undertake a long and potentially hazardous journey, to see her cousin and offer her support.

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.

Luke 1. 39-40

As we begin our own journey through these weeks, consider Mary. What motivated her to set out? What might have been going on in her mind and her heart as she travelled along the road? Take time to talk over with God all that you see and experience here.

Prayer for the journey

Lord, setting out can be difficult.

In many ways I would rather stay where I am,
in a place and with people I know,
comfortable in my familiar habits.

Help me to take these first steps along the road,
hoping to recognise you along the way.

Amen.

Monday of Advent 1 - What to take

A gift to ask from God

We ask for the gift of being able to distinguish between what we might want and what we truly need, for the grace to be able to travel lightly on our journey through life.

A reflection for the road

Have you ever sat on an overflowing suitcase to try and get the zips to close and the straps to fasten? Or have you ever come home from a holiday and only then realised that you hadn't used half of what you took with you? When setting out on a journey, there is always a temptation to take far more than we need. It is one way of dealing with the stress induced by leaving home, abandoning (if only temporarily) all that is familiar and comfortable.

Think of your own journey between now and Christmas, or more generally of wherever you find yourself in life at the moment. What do you truly need to be carrying with you? Are there things, people, situations that you might be better letting go of, or leaving behind? Should you be travelling a little lighter?

Scripture to accompany us

In chapter 9 of Luke's gospel, we see how Jesus sends out some of his closest followers on their first missionary journey. He instructs them to take little with them, assuring them that everything they need will be provided for them:

Take nothing for your journey, no staff, no bag, nor bread, nor money - not even an extra tunic. Whatever house you enter, stay there.

Luke 9. 3-4

If this sounds a little impractical, a little idealistic, it is. How, when you think of your own journey, might this passage help you to counter the very human tendency to take too much along with you?

Prayer for the journey

Gracious God,

you call on your followers to travel lightly,
trusting that what they need will be given to them on the road.

Help me to lay down some of the burdens that I cling to,
trusting that I will lack nothing
as I journey to you and with you.

Amen.

Tuesday of Advent 1 - Companions: John the Baptist

A gift to ask from God

We ask that we might be alert to whoever and whatever in my own life calls us to turn back to God.

A reflection for the road

At the beginning of Advent, the Church puts before us the enigmatic figure of John the Baptist. His role is to prepare the people to greet Christ when he comes. He does this by calling them to repentance. The Greek word used in the gospels (*metanoia*) means literally to turn around, to face a different direction. If you start off facing the wrong way, no amount of moving forward will take you to your goal. So it is important, especially in the initial stages of your progress, to check that you are correctly orientated.

Here, however, John is also seen as a companion for the journey. He is able to point out Jesus when others do not recognise him. He is content to fade into the background so that others may come to Christ. Who, or what is it in your own life that performs these essential tasks? How do you make sure that you are heading in the right direction, and how do you allow Christ to be pointed out to you amidst the confusion and busyness of everyday life?

Perhaps, too, you find yourself playing the Baptist's part for others, helping them to see the way that they should go, and graciously moving out of the way when your help is no longer needed. It is not easy to be self-effacing in this way, but your reward is to know that someone has been able to come to God, at least in part through the support that you have offered them.

Scripture to accompany us

John the Baptist had his own following even before Jesus appeared. Yet he was content to let those men and women leave him behind so that they might follow the one whose coming he had announced.

'I am not the Messiah, but I have been sent ahead of him...For this reason my joy has been fulfilled. He must increase, but I must decrease.'

John 3. 28-30

Can you think of times when you have had to step back, to 'decrease', so that others might move forward in the way that they should? Think for a moment how that felt, both at the time and afterwards, when you were perhaps aware of the good that had been achieved by your actions.

Prayer for the journey

Lord Jesus,
John the Baptist pointed you out
to those who were searching for you,
even when he had to stand aside to do so.
Help me to learn from his humility
so that I, too, may show others the way to you,
allowing them to move freely
without clinging on to them.
Amen.

Wednesday of Advent 1 - Valleys

A gift to ask from God

We ask for a deeper appreciation of the gifts that God offers us in the ordinary business of living day by day.

A reflection for the road

On a winding road between hills I am able to see the way ahead, but they block out a wider view. This is not a bad image, perhaps, for much of life. I know what I have to do today and tomorrow, and it may be much the same as yesterday. I do not have the time or the inclination to look further afield, or strike off into open country, away from the beaten track. Does any of that correspond to where you find yourself on your own journey at the moment?

Walking through valleys can be a bit predictable, without any of the exhilaration and wide vistas of the high peaks. At the same time it can be sheltered from the worst of the weather, and the way is likely to be clear, so at least I will not get lost. Often roads, railways and even canals will follow valleys. So I follow paths that others have used before me, and I journey alongside other travellers who choose the same safe route.

Do you sense a certain lack of excitement here? We have scarcely set out on our Advent journey and already we are confronted with the everyday, the mundane, the humdrum. Perhaps you hoped for something a little more exciting? Yet the God we are journeying to meet has himself chosen, by becoming human, to join us on the ordinary days of our lives, as much as in the high points and memorable moments.

Scripture to accompany us

Psalm 84 describes the longing of pilgrims for their goal, Jerusalem, and includes lines reflecting on the journey to get there:

As they go through the valley of Baca they make it a place of springs.

Psalm 84. 6

It is not clear where the valley of Baca was, or even if it was a real geographical location. The name means a place of tears or weeping, and so the meaning is clear. For those who journey with the hope of meeting God, even the bitter salt tears of a gloomy valley can become instead refreshing springs that offer strength to continue onwards. How might the thought that you are today journeying towards God transform what might otherwise be a gloomy prospect of an ordinary, boring day?

Prayer for the journey

Dear God,
as I pass through the valley of everyday life,
plodding along, one foot in front of the other,
help me to see the refreshment you offer me
in the people and the events,
the challenges and the achievements,
in everything that you bring my way today.
Amen.

Thursday of Advent 1 - Weather

A gift to ask from God

We ask for the gift of being able to read the signs of the times more clearly.

A reflection for the road

Those of us who are experienced hikers will know that the weather can sometimes be surprising and totally unpredictable. Some of us will distinctly remember long hikes during which we found ourselves caught in squally rain, only then to be greeted by sunshine and rising temperatures; and then, by alternating rain and sun until the end of the day.

When you are on the road, a clear, cool morning can lift the spirits and make the journey seem easy. Cold and damp, on the other hand, seep into the soul, making you wonder why you ever set out in the first place.

As we get older, some of us can recognise more clearly the weather of our own temperament. Some days, we get up feeling overcast and gloomy; other days, we feel fresh and clear-headed. Sometimes there is a clear reason for this: a late night after a few drinks, or a good sleep after a tiring day. Perhaps more often, our mood is simply there, like the weather. We cannot do much to change it, but we can choose how to react to it, positively or negatively.

Scripture to accompany us

'Red sky at night, shepherds' delight; red sky in the morning, shepherds' warning.' It seems that this proverb, still in use today, was known by Jesus. In Matthew's gospel he tells the Pharisees and Sadducees:

When it is evening, you say, 'It will be fair weather, for the sky is red.' And in the morning, 'It will be stormy today, for the sky is red and threatening.' You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, but you cannot interpret the signs of the times.

Matthew 16. 2-3

Using traditional wisdom and helped perhaps by modern technology, I can interpret much of what the weather may have in store and take some steps to prepare myself appropriately. When I look at the world around me, using whatever aids are available, can I get some sense at least of the way my life's journey is going, and see what I need to do now to prepare for what may lie on the road ahead?

Prayer for the journey

Heavenly Father,
as sun and rain come and go,
as storms threaten me and clear skies console me,
let me not lose sight of the signs of your presence,
the signs of all that you are doing in our world.
Amen.

Friday of Advent 1 - Shelter

A gift to ask from God

We ask for the gift of being more aware of the blessings that my house or home offers, and of the needs of those who are not so fortunate.

A reflection for the road

Christina Rossetti's poem, 'In the Bleak Midwinter' (which has become a popular Christmas carol) speaks of earth as 'hard as iron', 'water like a stone', and ever-deepening snow. It is at times like these that we really come to appreciate the shelter that our home affords, and perhaps are more than usually conscious of the homeless and those who are forced to live in inadequate accommodation.

A pilgrimage, and especially one undertaken in the winter, will focus your attention on finding shelter. With the comforts of home stripped away, you may be pleased to find that you can be content with much more basic housing than you expected, or perhaps you will grow in gratitude for the many things that you usually take for granted.

Even if you are not making a physical journey this Advent, it can be good to think prayerfully over some of these questions. What do you really need in order to lead a reasonably comfortable life? Are there areas of excess in your lifestyle that could be usefully trimmed away? Perhaps you might discover ways in which some of those who find themselves without adequate shelter (the homeless, asylum seekers and refugees) could benefit from your surplus.

Scripture to accompany us

The gospels suggest that during the period of his public ministry, Jesus had a place in Capernaum that he regarded as 'home'. Nevertheless his preaching took him on long journeys around Palestine, and on these occasions he clearly felt the lack of shelter at times. He challenged one would-be disciple by declaring:

Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.

Matthew 8.20

Even though he had friends around him and could count on the hospitality of benefactors like Mary, Martha and Lazarus, Jesus knew how it felt not to know where he would be staying each evening. Is there anything in your own past that corresponds to this experience? How did you feel at that time, and what does recalling that time say to you today?

Prayer for the journey

Jesus,
as you travelled the roads of Galilee and Judea,
you knew what it was like to be without shelter,
to have to rely on others' kindness for accommodation.
Help me to appreciate more deeply the place that I call 'home',
and to reach out to those who share your experience today.
Amen.

Saturday of Advent 1 - Rejection

A gift to ask from God

We ask for God's healing for the times when we have experienced rejection, and for forgiveness for the times when we have rejected others who have approached us in their time of need.

A reflection for the road

At two separate periods in my adult life, I (Fr John) have known what it is to be completely dependent on the material generosity of other people. Even now, many decades later, I am still struck by those individuals who seemed delighted to be given an opportunity to give to someone in need.

But for the grace of God, I could have indeed experienced rejection and a refusal of others to be generous. Had this happened, my memories would be very different today.

In other areas which are not related to material circumstances, I have experienced rejection; and all of us will have known something of rejection in our lives. Even if we have not been reduced to begging for the necessities of life, we will know the pain of a broken relationship, of an offer of help refused, or of a good intention misconstrued.

The invitation today is to reflect prayerfully on the impact that such rejection has had upon us. Have you been left bitter and resentful, and in need of God's healing touch? Or did rejection on this occasion make you more grateful for generosity received at other times, and more open to the needs of others yourself?

Scripture to accompany us

Jesus knew what it was to be rejected even before his birth. Luke tells of how his mother Mary...

...gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

Luke 2. 7

This rejection is not malicious; in fact, it is wholly understandable. It is census time, the town is packed out, and Mary and Joseph have arrived after all of the available rooms are taken.

Yet these considerations are unlikely to have made the young couple, expecting the imminent arrival of their first child, feel any better. They were refused the help that they asked for in an hour of great need.

In his public ministry, Jesus found himself repeatedly rejected, often by the religious people whom he might have expected to welcome his message most strongly. If you can talk in prayer to Jesus about rejections that you have experienced or inflicted on others, you can be sure that he knows what you are talking about.

Prayer for the journey

Loving Lord,

you know what it is to be, in the words of Isaiah the prophet, 'despised and rejected by others'.

Help me to deal with my own feelings of rejection,
and forgive me when I have rejected others in their need.

Amen.

