



Jerusalem

The place where Christ lived, was crucified and entombed has exerted extraordinary magnetic power over Christians from the fourth century to the present day. Pilgrims from all over the world have been eager to make the journey in order to pray and meditate in the Holy Land.

AN ADVENT PILGRIMAGE *Daily Reflections and Prayers for Advent*

WEEK FOUR

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 4

The Fourth Sunday of Advent - Growing strength

A gift to ask from God

We ask for the ever-growing strength that God offers to those who set their sights on him, so that we may journey on, regardless of fatigue or opposition.

A reflection for the road

In a week or two from now, many people will be taking up gym membership as part of their New Year's resolutions.

The desire to be a little fitter, a little leaner, is widespread, and is fuelled by relentless advertising. The same result can be a welcome by-product of a walking pilgrimage. A combination of miles each day on foot, as well as limited and uncertain meals, can do wonders for the waistline (even if this is not the ultimate goal). Over time, the effects multiply. As I become fitter, I find myself able to go further and faster, so I become yet stronger.

Perhaps there are parallels to be drawn with the spiritual life. When I start out, a quarter of an hour of prayer each day feels like a marathon. Over time, I grow in my ability to focus on God, and on the places where God is to be discovered, within myself and in my world.

As you look back over your lifetime's journey with God, can you recognise ways in which your strength has grown and your relationship with God has deepened? St Ignatius of Loyola called the practices he advocated 'spiritual exercises', drawing an explicit comparison between these and sprinting, leaping and other forms of bodily exercise.

Are you an athlete or a couch potato when it comes to the things of God? And what might help you to move up a notch or two in your religious fitness routine?

Scripture to accompany us

In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul offers a prayer for his readers that has powerfully influenced many through the centuries since he wrote it. It expresses something of what growth in the life of the Spirit looks like, and the hope that the letter's recipients might continue to move along this path and develop in this way.

I pray that, according to the riches of (the Father's) glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts.

Ephesians 3. 16-17

Once again, here we have the image of growing stronger as a sign of the move towards Christian maturity. In this brief passage, Father, Son and Holy Spirit - all of the members of the Trinity - have their role to play. Can you point to places and times in your own life, or in the lives of those close to you, where you have experienced the glory of the Father, the inner strengthening bestowed by the Spirit, or the indwelling of Christ in your heart? If so, you might want to take time to thank God for these gifts; if not, you might like to ask God for them.

Prayer for the journey

Christ of my own heart,
fill me with the strength of your Spirit
so that my every thought and deed
may resound to the Father's glory.
Amen.

Monday of Advent 4 - Losing your way

A gift to ask from God

We ask for the gift of knowing those parts of ourselves that are currently lost to God, and of allowing Christ to seek them out and to reunite them with his Father.

A reflection for the road

Dante's epic poem, the *Divine Comedy*, opens with the lines:

In the middle of the journey of our life
I found myself in a dark wood,
for the straight way was lost.

This may be the first description in literature of what is now known as the midlife crisis. Yet you do not have to be middle-aged to have a sense at times that you have lost your way and are no longer sure where you are heading. If this just lasts for a day or two, it may be no more than mildly irritating. If it persists for months and years, and calls into question the biggest decisions of your life to that point, it will seem much more threatening.

Often the worst thing that someone can do when they have lost their way is to blunder on regardless. This carries the risk of simply becoming even more disoriented and ending up even further from the right road. It is better to treat the experience of being lost as an invitation to stop, take a closer look at your surroundings and reassess how to move forward. Then, with luck, you may fairly soon find yourself back on track.

The Church's season of Advent offers an opportunity for such pause and reassessment, whether or not you feel yourself to be lost at the beginning of it. To have followed the Advent meditations so far, through these weeks, is itself a process of re-evaluation. Then Christmas, and the New Year that follows, may enable you to move forward with greater confidence, surer than you were before of the goal you are aiming at and the paths that are most likely to lead you there.

Scripture to accompany us

At the beginning of the fifteenth chapter of Luke's gospel, three stories of the lost are presented. First a lost sheep, then a lost coin and finally a lost son. In each case, what was lost at the beginning of the story is found by the end. More than that, the finding is an occasion for great, over-the-top rejoicing, reaching a crescendo with the joy of the father of the prodigal.

We had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.

Luke 15. 32

The father, we are told, has been continually on the lookout for the return of his erring child, and when he sees him, he welcomes him back without recrimination. Can you picture God searching for you in the lost areas of your life like that ? And can you imagine the depth of his rejoicing when he brings you back to him?

Prayer for the journey

Christ, our good shepherd,
you have promised to search untiringly for what is lost.
Search me out and find me,
and carry me home to share in your rejoicing.
Amen.

Tuesday of Advent 4 - Companions: the shepherds

A gift to ask from God

We ask for the gift of being able to re-evaluate the choices we make in our lives in the light of the good news that the gospel brings.

A reflection for the road

First-century Judean shepherds lived difficult lives. Up in the hills with their flocks for weeks on end, living rough, having to fight off predators and bandits; this was not a job for those with refined sensibilities. Along with that, the conditions in which they lived made it impossible for them to follow all the

observances of the Jewish law (at least as this was interpreted by the Pharisees and the other religious figures). So the shepherds were ritually unclean, beyond the pale of polite society.

Why, you might reasonably ask, would these be the very first to hear the news of the Messiah's birth? The explanation is given by a phrase that is controversial, but nonetheless true. God shows, consistently throughout the Bible, a 'preferential option for the poor'. It is not that God hates the rich, or does not care about those who are comfortably off. But time and again, when the kingdom of God is preached, it is the poor who have the first place and the best seats. What is more, it is frequently the poor who respond first and most fully. These shepherds no sooner hear the news than they come rushing to Bethlehem, abandoning in their haste their precious sheep.

God's way of working has not changed over the millennia. So today you might ask yourself (or even ask God) who are the poor and needy around you who are particularly in need of hearing the good news of the gospel? And which are the poor and needy parts of your own heart and soul that are most eager to respond to the word God addresses to you?

Scripture to accompany us

The first duty of shepherds is to guard the flocks that have been entrusted to them. Whatever else they do or do not do, this surely is the most necessary. The response these shepherds make to the message of the angels is thus by any standards extraordinary:

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, 'Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.' So they went with haste.

Luke 2. 15-16

The news of this child's birth, and the awe-inspiring way in which it was brought to them, puts their other duties into perspective. We will see this again later in the gospels: apostles, for instance, who leave their responsibilities in family businesses and customs offices to respond to Jesus's call. Everything that yesterday had top priority, that shaped the ways hours and days were spent, must be reassessed in the light of the Christ who breaks unexpectedly into ordinary lives. Is there anything in your own history, recent or more distant, that corresponds to this?

Prayer for the journey

My Lord and God,

if your call asks me to leave anything
of what seems most valuable in my life,
help me to hear you clearly and to respond to you promptly.
Amen.

Wednesday of Advent 4 - Milestones

A gift to ask from God

We ask for the gift of being able to recognise more clearly the most significant stages in my life journey, and how God has been beside me in them.

A reflection for the road

Milestones mark progress, in our lives as much as on our roads. The birth of a child, the first day at school, getting a job, marrying, retirement, death: these are all major stages in a life journey, shared with many others yet taking a unique shape and relevance in the life of each individual. The Church's sacraments (including baptism, marriage and the sacrament of the sick) mark many of these, emphasising that this life is in truth a journey to, and with God.

In today's prayerful reflection, you are invited to review some of the milestones of your own life. Some will be large-scale and public, like those mentioned above. Others may be more intimate and personal, but no less significant. When you look back over your life, what are the occasions that mark progress for you? You might select one or two to re-live, noticing the feelings and the emotions that this stirs up in you where you are today, and noticing too, how God has used these milestones to guide you to this place.

Scripture to accompany us

A search through half a dozen concordances suggests that there are no milestones in the Bible. But there are commemorative stones set up to mark significant events in the life of the people of God and of individuals.

As a young man, the patriarch Jacob had a dream of a ladder stretching from earth to heaven, and heard God promise that his descendants would become a great nation. His trust in this promise would shape the rest of his life.

So Jacob rose early in the morning, and he took the stone that he had put under his head and set it up for a pillar and poured oil on the top of it. He called this place Bethel; but the name of the city was Luz at the first.

Genesis 28. 18-19

The new name given by Jacob means 'House of God'. Both the name and the stone pillar would henceforth remind Jacob and others of the significance of his dream and of God's promise. You might like to look today at some of the physical objects (keepsakes, souvenirs, photos or letters) that remind you of significant moments in your past.

Prayer for the journey

My faith assures me, Lord,
that you have been there
at every significant moment of my life.
Help me to see more clearly today
the signs of your presence and of your unfailing help.
Amen.

Thursday of Advent 4, Christmas Eve - First sight

A gift to ask from God

We ask that we might know the persons that God calls us to be, and treasure the glimpses that we receive of our growth as that person.

A reflection for the road

You probably have some idea of the kind of person that you would like to be, and at times may even have set goals to attain some of those characteristics.

Perhaps you would like to be more patient, or less inclined to put things off, or better able to stand up for yourself. Whatever your own goals may be, the chances are that occasionally you catch yourself actually behaving, if only for a brief period, in that way. You receive a sort of 'first sight' of what you will be like when God welcomes you into his kingdom.

It is true that a 'first sight' does underline the fact that you have not yet reached your goal. The minute that you lapse from the behaviour that you long to show, there is a danger of fear that you will never attain it. Only a particular type of faith can ensure that a first sight is a source of encouragement and not a hindrance; faith that this goal can, and indeed will (with God's help) be reached in God's own time.

What goals in your own life do you already have a first sight of reaching?

Scripture to accompany us

Psalms 120 to 134 are collectively known as the Songs of the Ascents, and are thought to have been sung by pilgrims as they climbed up to Jerusalem for the

major Jewish festivals. It has been suggested that the second of these, Psalm 121, was prayed when the pilgrims first came in sight of the city that was their goal.

I lift up my eyes to the hills - from where will my help come?
My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth.

Psalm 121. 1-2

You might want to make these words your own as we keep this Christmas Eve. For some weeks now we have been earnestly looking forward to the birth of a Saviour. That birth, and so God's saving help, is now imminent. You have the opportunity to ask for whatever help you need, and the promise of help soon to be given. Let these promises shape your prayer today.

Prayer for the journey

Jesus the name the angel gave you means 'he who saves'.

As I draw near to the day of your birth,
bring me the help and salvation that I need and want;
help me to be the one you call me to be.
Amen.

Friday of Advent 4, Christmas Day - Arriving

A gift to ask from God

We ask for the grace to be grateful for all of the gifts that we have received from God on this journey.

A reflection for the road

The best-known (literary) pilgrims in English history - those of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* - never arrive at their destination. Or at least the work concludes before Canterbury is reached. Another traveller in religious literature - Christian in John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* - does finally reach his goal (the Celestial City) but he must cross the River of Death to do so. In many ways, a pilgrimage is better defined by the journey we have undertaken, rather than by the destination at which we have arrived. Yet without the lure of the destination, who would ever set out on the journey?

Our destination in this Advent journey has been Christmas, the birth of Jesus Christ, the Saviour of the world. In image and symbol it is a journey to the Christmas crib, a poor stable where a young woman gives birth to a boy, her firstborn son. All who are drawn there bring their gifts. The shepherds bring lambs, and the Magi bring gold, frankincense and myrrh. Throughout these weeks of pilgrimage, we have been asking God for the gifts we ourselves need. Now it is time to bring our gifts to Christ.

So what gifts do you bring, at the end of these weeks, to the infant in the manger? What can you offer him of what you are and what you have? Even now, God is not to be outdone in generosity. You can be sure that you will receive much more than you give. So you might ask yourself what it is in particular that you still need from God on this Christmas Day.

Scripture to accompany us

Eight hundred years before the birth of Christ, the prophet Isaiah spoke of one who was to come in the future. His words, as is true of so many of the sayings of the prophets of Israel, were ambiguous, capable of being understood and applied in different ways by different people. But for Christians, this prophecy has always had a single meaning, and helps us to understand more fully the event that we celebrate today.

The Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel.

Isaiah 7. 14

When Matthew at the beginning of his gospel applies this prophecy to Jesus, he explains that the name the child is given means 'God with us'. The people of Israel knew that from their own experience. God had been with them, whether they were slaves in Egypt or a powerful nation under David and Solomon. With the arrival of Jesus, his followers would come to know that same truth in a new way. In the person of Christ, God was with them, and is with us.

What is there in your experience of the last month that would lead you to say that God is with you?

Prayer for the journey

Immanuel, God with us,

I welcome your arrival as a newborn baby.

Accept the gift of myself,

my hopes and fears, my dreams and wonderings,

and use them all in your service.

Amen.



