



Canterbury Cathedral

After the murder of the Archbishop Thomas Becket at the cathedral in 1170, Canterbury became one of the most notable towns in Europe, as pilgrims from all parts of Christendom came to visit his shrine. Becket's Feast Day is 29th December.

AN ADVENT PILGRIMAGE

Daily Reflections and Prayers for Advent

WEEK THREE

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 3

The Third Sunday of Advent - Rest

A gift to ask from God

We seek the gift of hearing and responding to God's word to us when he calls us to periods of rest and recuperation.

A reflection for the road

At the beginning of the third week of Advent, it can seem like a long haul. If you are still, in prayer or otherwise, consciously preparing yourself to meet the coming Christ, the journey to date might seem like a long one, and yet there is still a long way to go. Perhaps it is time for a rest? Some of the churches recognise and honour this impulse by celebrating today as *Gaudete Sunday*.

Gaudete, the first word heard in today's Eucharist, means 'rejoice'. In a subtle anticipation of Christmas, we are encouraged to rest briefly in our preparation and to recognise the reality of our present situation. We find ourselves living in that period of history when Christ has, in fact, already come, when our redemption has in truth been accomplished. It is good, certainly, to remember the centuries of preparation in Israel as they awaited their Messiah. But it is equally good to rejoice that he is already here with us.

A period of rest in any long journey can also be one of recuperation, of regathering strength so that we can take up the journey again, refreshed. It need not be time wasted or squandered. Properly used, it may even refocus our attention on our goal, and free us from what otherwise might distract us.

What would help you, on this *Gaudete Sunday*, to renew your own preparation for Christmas in the time remaining?

Scripture to accompany us

The story of the feeding of the five thousand is full of bustle and incident: crowds listening to Jesus, the search for food, its miraculous provision and the collecting up of leftovers. Perhaps surprisingly, however, as told in Mark, such a busy story starts with an invitation to rest.

The apostles gathered around Jesus, and told him all that they had done and taught. He said to them, 'Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while.'

Mark 6. 30-31

As a Christian disciple, you may well be familiar with the idea of God wanting you to do something, such as caring for someone in need or standing up for justice. The idea that God might call you to a time of rest may be less expected. Yet clearly, in the gospel, that is what he does. Do you perhaps have a sense of areas in your life where God is offering you a time of rest today?

Prayer for the journey

Creator God,
who rested on the seventh day
after all the work that you had been doing,
help me to hear your call
to a balance in my life,
to times of rest and refreshment.
Amen.

Monday of Advent 3 - Giving up

A gift to ask from God

We ask for the gift of never being too discouraged by my faults and failings, for the grace to be able to start again when I stumble or fall.

A reflection for the road

A song from the 1930s pointed out the repeated need to 'pick yourself up, dust yourself down, and start all over again.'¹ This might not be too difficult the first once or twice, when we can persuade ourselves that with just one more push, a little more effort, we will never fall again. But each of us has stumbling blocks, faults and failings, that get in our way again and again, and that we never seem to manage to avoid.

It is then that the temptation to give up is the strongest. If I know that I am going to fall, no matter how much I struggle not to, why bother with the struggle at all? If this journey to God seems, from where I find myself today, at least, like a hard and unremitting slog, why not choose an easier path? Others seem to thrive without putting in nearly this much effort. Why should I choose to be different?

One key to coping with this kind of situation is that phrase, 'from where I find myself today, at least'. The spiritual life has something in common with the English weather. Whatever it is like today, it will probably be different tomorrow. With luck (or, perhaps better, with God's providence), however blocked the road to God seems today, the way ahead will seem at least a little clearer tomorrow. Sometimes I choose not to give up hope now on the basis of little more than a hope that things will get better in time.

¹ Jerome Kern, Dorothy Fields (lyrics), 'Pick Yourself Up' (1936).

Scripture to accompany us

On one occasion Peter asked Jesus how often he must forgive those who wronged him, suggesting that forbearance seven times would be proof of heroic virtue. The answer that Jesus gave surprised not just Peter, but all who heard it.

Then Peter came and said to him, 'Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?' Jesus said to him, 'Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.'

Matthew 18. 21-22

Here we see what amounts to a test case in not giving up, in being prepared to go on forgiving wrongs far beyond what seems natural, or even reasonable. But this passage can also change our viewpoint.

If God expects me to be this forgiving, it can only be that God shows me similar graciousness. The more important truth is that God never gives up on me. It is this realisation that provides both assurance and motivation for me to keep on picking myself up when I fall, and continuing along the road.

Prayer for the journey

Forgiving God,
you have never, despite my sins, given up on me
but continue to offer me your hand in friendship.
Grant that I may be so forgiving,
and never let obstacles bar my way to you.
Amen.

Tuesday of Advent 3 - Companions: Mary and Joseph

A gift to ask from God

We ask for the gift of coming to know more clearly this husband and wife who would be responsible for the upbringing of Jesus.

A reflection for the road

A young woman in the final stages of pregnancy and her new husband have to make a long journey to an unfamiliar and crowded city where they have no guarantee of lodging or welcome. Even today, we cannot imagine undertaking such a trip lightly. Yet Mary and Joseph felt that they had no option. This can partly be attributed to the Roman census, presented as allowing no exceptions. More fundamentally, they are both shown as allowing themselves to be guided by God, even when they did not fully understand what was happening.

Basic presentations of the topic of Christian discernment can make it sound like an easy task to determine the will of God in my life. A few prayer techniques, a little attentiveness, and I am wholly clear about what God wants of me and why. Unfortunately (or perhaps fortunately), real life is much more complicated. For much of the time my discernment shows me at best the next couple of steps I must take, with only a hazy sense of the bigger picture. As companions on my journey, one lesson that Mary and Joseph may teach me is that of trust.

How would you describe your own sense of what God is calling you to, today or at this stage of your life in general? Which parts of this call, if any, seem relatively clear to you? Which parts are less clear and call you to trust? Are there aspects of your life where you have no idea at all of what God might be doing? If so, can you offer them to God today, asking for clearer vision?

Scripture to accompany us

An attentive reading of the gospels gives much insight into the character of Jesus's mother. Joseph remains a much more shadowy figure and has disappeared altogether by the time the public ministry of Jesus starts. Two verses in Matthew's gospel, however, offer a sense of the relationship between the two, even before they came to live together as husband and wife.

When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly.

Matthew 1. 18-19

In fact, after his own visit by an angel, Joseph becomes a loving and protective husband. Without sentimentalising it and turning it into a Christmas card scene, can you imagine the kind of bond that grew between these two, and the foundation that laid for the character and outlook of the Jesus you meet in prayer?

Prayer for the journey

Jesus, son of Mary,
as I accompany in my imagination
Joseph and Mary on the road from Nazareth to Bethlehem,
help me to know more deeply their trust in God,
and so let my own trust deepen.
Amen.

Wednesday of Advent 3 - Crossroads

A gift to ask from God

We ask for the gift of discernment in the choices that face us along the way.

A reflection for the road

No one, I suspect, likes to think of their life journey as wholly predetermined, simply moving along fixed tramlines until the destination long-ago chosen for them is reached. This is why crossroads are important. They are a place to pause, consider your options, and then set out again on the path that you have freely chosen. But if crossroads offer choice, they also offer the possibility of making a wrong choice. At a crossroads, I need to be particularly confident in the direction I want to go in, in the map that I am using to guide me, or in the advice that is offered to me.

One source of encouragement here is that we have the ability to learn from our mistakes. So it is worth giving prayerful consideration today to those turning points in your life where you were able to choose between various ways forward. Can you recall occasions when you now feel that you chose well? How did you go about choosing? Perhaps you can also bring to mind times when you now consider that you chose badly. From where you are now, what do you think went wrong? What hindered you from making a better choice?

Few of our choices are definitive. Our faith holds that God has a great capacity for turning mistakes into experiences that can, in the long run, benefit us. This is captured in the mediaeval idea of *felix culpa*, the 'happy fault'. Even the sin of Adam and Eve, it suggests, expelling us from Paradise, became an occasion for God to send his Son to be Immanuel, God with us.

Can you see times when God has used any of your own mistakes to bring a greater good into your own life or that of those around you?

Scripture to accompany us

In chapter ten of Mark's gospel, Jesus encounters a rich man who is searching for deeper meaning in his life. The man finds himself at a crossroads, uncertain of which way to go forward. As a result of their conversation, Jesus offers him the possibility of becoming a disciple, but also spells out something of what it will cost. He does not pressurise the man; the choice is to be his and his alone.

In reading this passage, we tend to jump to the end, where the man rejects Jesus's invitation because it means relinquishing his wealth. As a result (we are told) he goes away sadly.

But I suggest that in prayer today you stay at the crossroads itself, at the moment when the man first hears the invitation and is pondering how to respond. At this point, Mark offers a significant detail:

Jesus, looking at him, loved him.

Mark 10. 21

What does it feel like to experience Jesus's steady gaze of love at you as you consider decisions that may face you?

Prayer for the journey

Lord of the crossroads,
my life can seem full of choices, large and small.
Help me always to make those decisions
that will lead me, and others, in your direction.
Amen.

Thursday of Advent 3 - Providence

A gift to ask from God

We ask that we might be able to experience more fully the providence of God in the generosity of others and the abundance of nature.

A reflection for the road

Providence is the belief that God will provide what is needed for those who trust in him. God does not stop pilgrims from getting blisters or guarantee that they will not, on occasion, be cold, wet or hungry; just as, on a larger scale, God does not intervene directly to prevent war, famine or natural disasters. Yet people of faith trust that God will ultimately provide what they need, even when such trust is hard won and in the face of much evidence to the contrary.

Where are you most aware of God's provident care for you at this point in your life's journey?

Scripture to accompany us

When Christ sent out his closest disciples on their own apostolic journeys, he gave them the following instructions:

Take no gold, or silver, or copper in your belts, no bag for the journey, or two tunics, or sandals, or a staff; for labourers deserve their food.

Matthew 10. 9-10

Notice here that Jesus does not expect his followers to be destitute and starving as a result of the way in which he has sent them. Yet neither do they have the sense of entitlement to what they receive that comes from earning a wage. They are rather to rely on the generosity of others, and in this recognise the providence of God. Can you point to anything in your own life, past or present, which corresponds to this experience?

Prayer for the journey

Provident God,

I know that everything I have comes from you.

Help me to experience that will joyful trust,

and keep me from needy anxiety.

Amen.

Friday of Advent 3 - Starting again

A gift to ask from God

We ask for the grace of being able to treat each new day as a new gift from God, to welcome it and to embrace with enthusiasm all that it offers.

A reflection for the road

Some years ago one of the participants in a retreat I was running spoke to me about the challenge he found in simply getting each day under way. After he woke up he would lie in bed, and the thoughts of all the tasks he had to do that day would come crowding in on him. With every minute he lay like this, the job of even getting up seemed to get harder and harder.

On a pilgrimage, if you have been lucky enough to find adequate shelter for the night, taking leave of it to face another uncertain day of wind and rain on the road is a challenge in itself. The longer the journey, the greater the temptation to simply stay put. Yet the more rational part of yourself is well aware that if you succumb to this temptation, you will never reach your goal. The only way onward is to start the journey again each morning.

The retreatant who had this difficulty finished by saying to me, 'But you're far too young to know about that, Father.' I did not think so at the time, and feel the same way now. This reluctance to gear oneself up to start again is not a matter of age. Many everyday tasks often seem more difficult before we start them than they do once they are under way. Yet you cannot discover that by procrastination.

Can you see in yourself anything of this attitude towards new beginnings? If so, what helps you to overcome it?

Scripture to accompany us

In the book of Isaiah appears a mysterious figure, a servant who has to undergo considerable suffering to serve his God. There is much debate about whom this servant represents. Is it the Jewish nation, personified? Is it an alternative version of the triumphant Messiah, expected for so long? Is it a prophecy of Christ himself, as parts of the New Testament suggest? Perhaps it can be all of these and more. You might even find aspects of the suffering servant in your own life of discipleship.

Morning by morning he wakens - wakens my ear, to listen as those who are taught. The Lord God has opened my ear.

Isaiah 50. 4-5

Each morning the servant wakes in the expectation of being taught by God in the events of the day ahead and in the people encountered through the course of the day. The events may be challenging, and the people at times hostile, but the assurance is that God will be present, making himself known to those who pay attention. The servant has only to be prepared to start afresh each day.

Are you willing and able to serve God in this way?

Prayer for the journey

God, ever ancient and ever new,
I ask you to dispel whatever sloth and reluctance
would stop me from greeting you afresh each day.
Amen.

Saturday of Advent 3 - Night

A gift to ask from God

We ask for the gift of trust, so that we can continue on our journey to God even when the experience of God is absent.

A reflection for the road

What immediately springs to mind when you hear the word 'night'? A comfortable bed and refreshing sleep? Or dark and cold hidden dangers?

Much depends on your own circumstances. If you live a reasonably secure and predictable life, it may well be the first. If your existence is, for whatever reason, more precarious, the second might be closer to your experience. As one of the effects of the pilgrimage, as we have seen repeatedly this month, is to make you a little less secure than usual, it may be that it also makes the night seem more challenging.

The Spanish mystic St John of the Cross popularised the idea of the 'dark night of the soul'. This is a time in a disciple's spiritual life which may be fleeting, or last for decades (as it did with Mother Teresa of Calcutta). In such a time, it feels as if God is distant and unreachable; and prayer and other spiritual practices hold no attraction. John is sure, however, that God is still very close to you and at work with you during such a time. It is the 'felt experience' which is lacking, for reasons that are frequently unclear.

Although you may not be a mystic, it is entirely possible that you have gone through periods when God has seemed absent in this way. You may even be at that point during this Advent season. What to do?

The advice of those who have prayerfully considered this situation is unanimous. Simply carrying on faithfully, seeking God in prayer and living a godly life. The seasoned pilgrim knows that every night has its dawn, which will come no matter how cold, dark or uncomfortable the preceding hours have been.

Scripture to accompany us

One of the most chilling verses in the whole of Scripture comes towards the end of John's account of the Last Supper. Jesus has confronted Judas Iscariot, knowing that he is about to betray him. Judas responds by leaving the room to go and summon the soldiers who will shortly arrest Jesus. The other apostles, meanwhile, continue eating and drinking, oblivious to all that is taking place. John gives the context in four short words:

And it was night.

John 13. 30

This is not intended as a time check, registering that the evening meal has lasted for quite a while. John's gospel has already reflected frequently on the contrast between light and darkness. Now the darkness has its hour.

Yet Jesus faces this darkest moment simply by continuing with carrying out his Father's will, as he sees it. Nothing, not even the fall of night, can knock him off course. It is this constancy in the face of grave difficulty that today's prayer encourages you to consider and seek.

Prayer for the journey

To you who are Lord even of the darkness,
today I make my own the prayer of St John Henry Newman:
'Lead, kindly light, amid the encircling gloom,
lead thou me on.'
Amen.

²From the poem 'The Pillar of Cloud', by John Henry Newman, 1833.

