

# CHRISTMAS NOVENA

## CONSOLATA SHRINE



In the year of the Family, ***Joy and Splendor of True Love***, during this novena we want to reflect upon the different characters whom God wanted them to be making the Family Scene of Christmas. By doing so, we wish to make also our families a Christmas scene too.

Each and every one of them was very human, as much as also in deep communion with God. And that is what we want of the families... very human and very spiritual at the same time.

Let us keep our journey of Faith, Hope and Love, praying for our families and for our nation!

# 1<sup>st</sup> Day

*John 5:33-36*

## **JOHN THE BAPTIST** **A burning and shining lamp**



According to the gospel of John, we are told both what John the Baptist was and what he was not. He was a witness. This is a legal term, and it has been seized upon as part of the evidence for understanding the whole of John's gospel as the account of a trial. Jesus is on trial from its beginning and John is his first witness. In the Acts, we read of Paul, years later, meeting disciples of John the Baptist in Ephesus (Acts 19:3). Right at the beginning of his gospel, John makes it clear that the Baptist was not the light: Jesus was the light, as he was to proclaim publicly

in his ministry when he spoke out in Jerusalem, 'I am the light of the world' (Jn 8:12).

Then, we are again told who John was not. He was not the Messiah (like some King David), nor was he Elijah, and he was not a prophet like Moses (Deuteronomy 18:15). For this gospel, Jesus fulfils, completes and goes beyond the person and mission of all such figures. John will soon witness to his own disciples how Jesus was the Lamb of God (1:35). His role will be summed up in his own words, 'He must increase, I must decrease' (4:30). He has no further part to play in this gospel, although Jesus will refer to his activity as witness after his healing the cripple by the pool of Bethzatha: 'You sent messengers to John, and he testified to the truth' (5:33). Yet, he was a burning and shining lamp.

The humility of John is a challenge to everyone with a part to play in the mission of the Church, but it is no passive humility. Whoever wrote the gospel according to John was quite convinced of the Christian need to witness. This is what the community does at the beginning of the first letter of John: 'We declare to you what we have seen and heard' (1 John 1:3). May the Christian communities of today continue this mission of witness in a hostile and unbelieving world, becoming burning and shining lamps, bearing witness to the truth, to Jesus, the one whom the Father had sent.

*By Peter Edmonds SJ*

### **Prayer**

Father God, prepare our hearts not only for the celebration to come, but also for sharing that Good News with friends, family and work colleagues should opportunity arise. Grant us courage and a real willingness to talk about the love that came down to earth and walked among us, especially within our families. This Advent season, may we be filled with expectation, as we celebrate the greatest gift of all; your Son, Jesus Christ. Amen

## 2<sup>nd</sup> Day

Matthew 1:1-17

### JOSEPH The husband of Mary



It is not surprising that the Advent season brings Joseph to the forefront. The events surrounding the conception and birth of Jesus are the only passages in the Gospels when he is mentioned. They provide us with a brief snapshot of the man who is otherwise silent. And yet those few verses give us something quite special. Joseph has a crucial role to play. He is an example to us of goodness, a man who accepts his vocation to be the foster father of Jesus. He cares for Mary during her pregnancy, and brings her to a place of safety to give birth. He is also a model of obedience

to God's word, shown so clearly when he leads Mary and Jesus to safety in Egypt, away from Herod, who wanted Jesus killed. He then listens to the word of the Lord, which urges the Holy Family's return, after the death of Herod.

We should not doubt the significance of Joseph in Jesus' upbringing, even if we do not have much any information about it in the Gospels. The thirty hidden years were Jesus' time of preparation for his public ministry, a time which would have been shaped by sitting at the feet of the carpenter, listening to him and learning from him in that same spirit of obedience which Joseph himself showed when God's word came to him through the message of an angel. Joseph attended to God's word when the message of the angel came, and now tends to the Word himself, caring for him and nurturing him so that Jesus will be able to do the will of the Father when his time to proclaim the Good News has come.

Joseph is a great Advent character. He is a model to us of humble obedience, an obedience that comes through attending to the Word of God. Advent is a time when we too are called to attend to the word, so that when Christmas comes, we will be ready for him to be born anew in us. And Joseph is also a reminder that that spirit of loving attention is not just for Advent, or even for Christmas, but is something to cultivate all year round.

*By Robert Gay OP*

### Prayer

This Advent-time we remember Mary and Joseph, giving thanks for their faithfulness, courage and obedience, stepping out into the unknown in the strength of your Spirit, playing their part in the fulfilment of your plan to bring your prodigal people home again. We pray that their example might be the pattern of our lives, especially for fathers and husbands, that when your gentle whisper breaks through the clamor of this world and into our small corner, we might be ready to listen, and having listened, to act.

# 3<sup>rd</sup> Day

Matthew 1:18-24

## EMMANUEL God with us

O Come,  
O Come  
Emmanuel



God is with us. Emmanuel. Close your eyes, quiet your heart and hear the word pass through your lips and realize what it means.

This is the thing that makes Christianity unique. This is what makes the Christian faith more than a philosophy or a legend. It's what makes it the real deal. This is what renders every other belief in every other god meaningless and a sham.

The Incarnation is the most tender, most revealing, most daring love letter ever written:

*"I love you so much. I long for you. You cannot become as I am, so I will become as you are. You cannot reach Me, so I will inhabit you. There shall never be anything between us ever again. Your darkness is now My light. There is no part of you I refuse. I withhold nothing from you."*

Jesus *came*. He shed His robe of glory and put on vulnerable flesh. He became one of us, clothed in our skin and bones and blood and sweat and tears. He blessed and restored our humanity by inhabiting it Himself and closed the gap between mortal and immortal. By taking that mortal flesh to the cross to shed His precious and perfect blood, He bridged the impassable chasm between us and our Creator.

Our God has done the unthinkable, the unimaginable, the impossible, the radical, and the incredible. He came, and He remains. He is with us still. Does a God of anger or arrogance humble Himself and take on the very form of His created ones in order to save them from their own sin? Does a God of contention lay His authority down and subject Himself to the law of the world He created? Does a vengeful God surrender Himself to an unjust death for the sake of those murdering Him?

And still, the world doesn't get it! Still, the reality of Christ's unabashed love for us is not understood. Still, He is with us, unnoticed. Still, we forget the magnitude of what He has done. Still, we are unaware of who He is.

Rejoice! There is no distance between us and our God. We do not stand outside His door weeping, begging for a glance from His furrowed brow, or a crumb from His table. He has demolished the wall between us and carried us inside His house to enjoy everything He has, including the food of Himself.

Our God alone is worthy of praise and honor and awe and obedience because He has left no measure of separation between us and Himself. Out of love our King became our servant. Love compelled the spotless Lamb to become every wretched, repulsive, disgusting sin in order to free us, cleanse us and make us new. Love compelled the Lord who owes us nothing to pay everything to cancel our debt.

There is none beside Him. Only Jesus is Emmanuel, *God with us*. Nothing in this world is more deserving of our attention, especially this season. Whatever else may be going on, our gaze should be fixed on Emmanuel. We should be looking expectantly at that manger with grateful hearts. We not only can rejoice, we must rejoice.

Of course, life will go on, and our obligations must be met. Work must be done and should be done. Important current issues must be dealt with and not ignored. But heaven forbid we blow past Advent in our haste, worry and stress, and fail to open our minds and our hearts each day to the miracle of Emmanuel.

Heaven forbid we do not read this love letter. It is an astounding reality our language cannot articulate. It is the summation of our every need; the complete expression of God's desire. The Word made flesh. It's the only word the world needs to hear.

Emmanuel ~ God is with us! Rejoice!

*By Jennifer Hartline - Catholic Online*

## Prayer

Emmanuel, God with us. The name that sums up what Christmas means for any believer. You God, who didn't want just to make yourself accessible, but made yourself a servant. You, infinite God enclosed in a woman's womb for nine months and therefore, you made yourself vulnerable. You, the firstborn of creation, sitting on Mary's lap, learning to read and write! We entrust to you all children, including those to be born, that they may be all taken care of as real God's gifts. O come, O come! God, be with us!

## 4<sup>th</sup> Day

*Luke 1:5-25*

### ANGEL

### **Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer is heard**

A few years ago, I created a presentation called Angels: the Biblical Story of Our Unseen Allies. Although I thought I knew the Story of Salvation very well, I found myself repeatedly surprised to rediscover how present the angels are throughout the Bible Timeline. In fact, every period of the Timeline has angels present and helping at key moments. Of course, when we reach the infancy narratives of John the Baptist and Jesus, the presence of angels is intensified.



The Archangel Gabriel appeared to Zechariah to announce the coming of John the Baptist (Lk. 1:11-19) and brings Mary the amazing news of the conception and coming of Jesus (Lk. 1:26-38). Her husband Joseph will receive two visits from angels (Mt. 1:20-24; 2:13,19).

But my favorite angelic event is the visit to the shepherds (Luke 2:9-15). Shepherds were among the poorest and

marginalized classes of people in the first century. That's not insignificant. The angels didn't appear to King Herod, a Roman official, or a Temple leader. They went to the fringes and announced the greatest message of human history to God's little ones. Given these different angelic moments, I want to propose three ways we can model the angels that surround the Advent of Jesus:

### **Worship**

When the angels announce the Good News of Jesus to the shepherds, it seems the whole of heaven breaks out in response, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among men with whom he is pleased" (Lk. 2:14). The shepherds then rush to see the King in the manger. After encountering the Holy Family, they take up the song of the angels, "glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them" (Lk. 2:20). I love that we do this every time we pray the Gloria in the Mass. We are taking up the song of the angels and echoing the praise of the poor shepherds. Every Mass is then an invitation to the mystery of the Nativity. Consider making a commitment to attend Mass more frequently during this Advent Season. Use the Gloria as a point of meditation during your prayer times.

### **Witness**

Angels almost always bring a message. In the Infancy Narratives, it is a message of hope and joy. We continue the work of the angels when we become faithful and fearless witnesses of this same Good News to our generation. Advent is a perfect time to share the Good News about Jesus. We can do this in so many ways. Consider writing a letter to your family and friends expressing what this Good News means to you personally and fold it in an Advent or Christmas card.

### **Works of Mercy**

The angelic hosts appeared to the poor shepherds first, a beautiful prefigurement of the Church's preferential love for the poor. I often think that Mary very likely showed them hospitality when they came to worship her Son, sharing the meager food the Holy Family may have had with them. Consider a special offering to the parish so to assist the needy. Invite people to share a meal with your family. Make a simple bag of toiletries, water and hand warmers to share with the homeless you may encounter.

*By Thomas Smith*

### **Prayer**

God, our loving Father, who dispose in marvelous order ministries both angelic and human, graciously grant, that our life on earth may be defended by those who watch over us as they minister perpetually to you in heaven. Bless us to imitate them in our service to you and to our brothers and sisters. Bless those who take care of our families even from a distance, since they are God's angels too. Amen

## 5<sup>th</sup> Day

Luke 1:26-38

### **MARY** **I am the handmaid of the Lord**



Mary is an important figure during this season of Advent. How she lived her life is a model for all Christians, but particularly for young adults. Mary was a very young woman when she received God's call to be the mother of Jesus. So too does God invite each of us, particularly the young, to discover God's plan.

The feast of the Immaculate Conception, which takes place during Advent, celebrates our Catholic belief that Mary was conceived without any sin. We believe she was born without the original sin that other human beings have when they come into the world.

With that in mind, we can be tempted to see Mary as someone programmed to do what God asked of her. Believing this is to deny Mary her humanity and the depth of her faith in God. Her greatness lies not in the fact that God preserved her from original sin, but that she responded affirmatively to God's call to be the mother of Jesus and that she strove to live God's will throughout her life. It is about her great faith, trust, love and willingness to say yes to whatever God asked of her, not knowing what the future held. We believe both she and Jesus had the same gift of free will that every human possesses and that they chose God's will over their own. It was not a forced decision.

The story of the Annunciation, which is proclaimed during Advent, can teach us a lot about answering our own call from God.

First of all, artists often portray Mary in a stance of prayer when the angel comes to her. Mary had a relationship with God. She was in love with God. Her heart was prepared to listen to God. Through her prayer and union with God she was open to God's will. If this were not the case, she probably would not have recognized the angel. Mary also discerned the situation. She asked a practical question. "How can this be?" She knew she was a virgin and what the consequences of becoming pregnant out of wedlock were. Even so, because of her great faith and trust in God she believed that God would make it happen, even though she did not understand how. It was her trust in God's goodness and love that enabled her to risk her future. She was absolutely sure that God loved her and would stand by her no matter what the consequences of her yes might be.

So it is with us. It takes prayer, faith and trust to answer God's call. We need to discover God's will in the context of prayer and in the other circumstances of our lives.

Preparing our hearts through prayer is very important because we are saying yes to a future we are not sure about. When two people marry they have no idea what their

lives together will bring. And when a person enters the religious life the same thing is true. One thing we know, however, and must be convinced of, is that God will be with us and take care of us no matter what life brings.

Like Mary, it is our ongoing love-relationship with God that sustains us and supports us in our attempts to answer God's daily call. Our trust in and our assurance of God's faithfulness give us the courage we need to carry out his will for us each day.

Mary's greatness ensues not only because she was chosen to be Jesus's mother, but also because she was a woman of faith, trust and love who said yes to God even though she did not understand all that God was asking of her.

During this season of Advent, let us pray to God to deepen our faith and help us bring hope to an often hopeless world. Like Mary, let us always have our hearts prepared to say yes to God in whatever circumstances we find ourselves.

*By Sr. Margie*

### **Prayer**

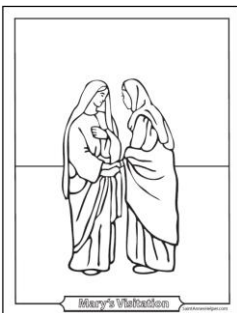
Gracious God, you have done so much for us and we so little in return. You ask for humility and we are often a proud people. You ask for willingness and we are often a stubborn people. You ask for repentance and we are often a deaf people. You ask for service and we are often a busy people. Gracious God, you want the best for us. Teach us obedience; grant us forgiveness; that we, like Mary might be your willing servants. Bless all mothers, image of Mary and image of the Church, especially in their humble service in their families. Amen.

## **6<sup>th</sup> Day**

*Luke 1:39-45*

### **ELIZABETH**

**Blessed are you among women,  
and blessed is the fruit of your womb!**



John the Baptist, as we have seen, had the special mission of being the Forerunner of the Christ, 'going ahead of the Lord to prepare his way' (Luke 1: 76). This mission began at his very conception, when Elizabeth miraculously conceives in her old age, pointing towards the miraculous events of the Annunciation and Incarnation: indeed, the angel Gabriel uses Elizabeth's conception as an example for Mary that 'nothing is impossible to God' (Luke 1: 37). Elizabeth, too, recognizes that her conception is a miraculous gift of God: 'the Lord has done this for me' she says (Luke 1: 25). Later on, when, Mary goes

to visit her, Elizabeth becomes the first to recognize, in response to the sign of the baby in her womb, the blessedness of Mary, and of the child she bears: her openness to



recognizing the working of God in her own life enables her to see and understand the 'great things' he has done for Mary (cf. Luke 1: 49)

And so Elizabeth is an example for us, too: as we prepare ourselves this Advent to receive the Christ, Elizabeth shows us that, to learn to recognize him when he comes, we must first recognize all the many things he has freely given to us. Then, just as Elizabeth recognized the Christ through the kicking of John the Baptist, God's gift to her, in her womb, we too may come, through God's gifts to us, especially of his Word and his Sacraments, to know Christ, the greatest gift and the consummation of them all.

*By Gregory Pearson, OP*

## **Elizabeth, Relative of God**

Nobody knew her name, but then she burst into history after a long life. Elizabeth was a failure by the standards of her culture, but God loved her. Just when most friends thought her time had past, Elizabeth found herself at the beginning of Christmas.

There is hope in her life for any of us.

God acts when the time is right and can empower anyone, at any time, in any place to do His will. Elizabeth loved God and God did not forget her. She was there at the start of Christmas.

Advent and Christmas means getting together with family and visits can be emotionally complicated, but only Elizabeth faced the surprise Advent visit of a very pregnant Virgin Mary. She faced this guest while very pregnant herself with a husband who had been cursed by an angel.

When Mary discovered she was pregnant, she knew where to go. Most anybody would guess, gossip, or judge her swelling belly, but Elizabeth would take her into a home and keep Mary safe.

Elizabeth hadn't given up on God and she did not give up on Mary. She had been mocked and viewed as cursed by the ignorant who think that one can guess God's will by the good or bad fortune of an individual. She had been judged by others, but she refused to prejudge Mary.

The older woman had longed to be pregnant and now an angel had promised her a son. She risked love and made John, the longed for boy. Imagine the first movement she felt from the boy within her body!

As an old woman, long past her cycle, Elizabeth could not be sure of the pregnancy until she felt a different life within her womb, movements not controlled by her will. Imagine *feeling a miracle* every day! Elizabeth knew God kept His promises every time John kicked.

But when Mary came to her home, the last Old Testament prophet met the fulfillment of every prophesy and recognized his purpose. No Christian can ignore the fact that two unborn children had already begun their earthly work. An unwed mother protected her son by fleeing to a pro-life relative.

Elizabeth was older than Mary, but she was a humble woman. Mary was mother of a greater person than her own beloved son. She was willing to take second place *joyfully*. Elizabeth was *happy* for Mary and was more in tune with her son and God than with her neighbors and external appearances.

Elizabeth models the possibility of knowledge that comes from within by faith in God promises. Elizabeth *saw and felt* was true and so could be happy when most of us would have been worried.

Elizabeth is always joyful, joyful in greeting Mary, and joyful at the birth of her son. Some of us might demand more from God, but Elizabeth was delighted with her one great blessing. She knew what she *should* want and that she was bound to get it and so could be content.

Elizabeth valued properly and history has given her proper value.

The old woman must have died happy as her son and his great relative, God's son, grew up. The baby grew and became a man, the forerunner to Messiah.

Mary would face pain so great that it would be compared to a sword thrust through her heart, but Elizabeth likely was not there for the conclusion of the life of her son John and Jesus.

She did not have to go to the foot of the cross. We have no record of her during John the Baptist's ministry.

Elizabeth was the last of the barren women of the Old Testament to bear a son through a miracle. She was the final and greatest symbol that God would love His bride Israel to the very end and redeem her beyond her last hope.

Today, this Advent season, we can stop moaning and end our despair. It is not too late for you, it is not too late for you to act for God, it is not too late for to have awesome joy.

Joy can come today to you, even if you are old.

Joy can come, because any woman who enters your door may be bearing Christ within and this is a great glory. Our love which seemed futile can become fecund. There is hope for us all, because we know if God can remove the reproach of Elizabeth, then he can do the same for us.

Come Christ Child into our homes! May our children leap for joy when you enter! Joy to the world

*By John Mark Reynolds*

## **Prayer**

Father God, when we consider your servant Mary, what we see is a humility and obedience that is so often lacking in our own lives. As we hear your Word again, and consider the one through whose body you entered this world, remind us of the meaning of humility and grant us a confidence of faith that knows your promises to us are always fulfilled. By remembering her cousin Elizabeth, we pray for all our relatives, that they may see God's action in their lives and that they may make out of each family meeting, an encounter with God himself.

## 7<sup>th</sup> Day

Luke 1:46-56

### **THE SHEPHERDS** **"He has exalted those of low degree"**



"And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them" (Luke 2.8-9).

Favoured men, the first to gaze upon the Lord's Christ! The wise men from the East came with their gifts, but the shepherds were there first with their homage, and forever afterwards those Judean shepherds glorified and

praised God for all the things that they had heard and seen, as it had been told unto them.

The shepherds heard the wonderful news the same day that it happened; the angel had said "unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord" . Perhaps even whilst he was speaking Mary was experiencing the never-to-be-forgotten wonder of taking her child into her arms for the first time.

Perhaps, as we enter into another Christmas season we may take time to think awhile of those simple Judean shepherds, who, one dark night, saw a great light, and in the power and inspiration of that light became changed men. They came to see and to worship; they returned glorifying and praising God for the things that they had learned and witnessed. We come to the Lord Jesus in like manner, but we see more than a babe in a manger. We see the King, resplendent in his power, taking to himself the sceptre of authority, bringing this evil world order to an end that He might set up in its place his own everlasting Kingdom of peace. Like those simple Judeans of old, we must needs return glorifying and praising God for the evidence of the coming Kingdom that we have seen and telling of that Kingdom with such zeal, such certitude, such forthrightness, that, like the people of Bethlehem and the country round about at the time of that first Christmas, "all they that heard it wondered of those things which were told them." The people of today sadly need such a message; the time is at hand, the angelic vision has appeared to us; our eyes have seen the King in his beauty. What else can we do but go on in the power and wonder of that peerless vision, talking to each other about it, telling our neighbors and friends the tremendous story, looking in faith for the fulfilment of the promise, waiting, watching, hoping, praying, until the angels come again, this time to raise the strains of a song that never shall die away so long as the earth endures.

## The Prayer of the Shepherd

St. Ignatius used to have a simple man who carried the modest baggage of his small group. During their journeys, this man would observe St. Ignatius and members of the Company of Jesus profoundly recollected in their long prayers. Filled with admiration, he thought to himself, "What beautiful things they must be saying to God!" He was certain their prayers were far more elevated and superior to those he was capable of making.

So he decided to offer to God those beautiful things he imagined they were saying. Watching them pray, he would simply make their prayers his prayer. Doing this, the simple man thus achieved the grace of elevated prayer.

I once read a beautiful meditation on the Nativity that imagined one of the shepherds who came to adore Christ. Imagine a poor shepherd, like the servant of St. Ignatius, distraught because he lacked the words to express the sentiments he felt. The shepherd saw the Divine Christ Child, so beautiful and amiable, and he discerned that this Child is Goodness itself. His forehead furled in wrinkles of concern. What could he say before the glory and grandeur of this Infant?

And then a thought occurred to him, like a grace that God always gives to simple souls: "Why don't I offer to the Divine Infant what His Blessed Mother Mary and adoptive father Joseph are expressing to Him? They are so perfect, so far above me, and they love Him as no one can love him."

Fixing his gaze on the three sublime figures, he murmured in the interior of his heart to Jesus:

*"O divine Infant, I say to You everything that they are saying to You, because they seem to me so holy and so profoundly recollected. By their countenances, I see they are immersed in divine mysteries that I cannot even imagine. Even though they are dressed simply, everything about them is noble and sublime, while everything about me is low and common, my body as well as my spirit.*

*"I sense that the things they are thinking and saying to You give You pleasure. The pleasure that they give to You is the pleasure that I myself desire to give to You. Receive, then, those tender endearments and profound consideration that they are making to You as if they came from my own heart and mind."*

He would have passed a long time in this simple, mute meditation. And almost without realizing it, his heart was overcome with tenderness for the God-Child. His soul, raised to the heights through Mary and Joseph, was filled with unknown lights and ardor. With one eye on the hidden God, the other eye on the two grand adorers, that simple soul was nourished incomparably by the incomparable Trio.

The meditation then invited each one of us to apply the case to himself. Why shouldn't I have recourse to the shepherd's humble prayer when I draw near the Crèche and feel within myself no elevation of spirit or profound thoughts? At times when I am preoccupied and tired, or suffering from heavy weights and trials? Despite my distractions and inertia, here is a means to forget myself and draw near Him.

When I approach the Christmas crib and find myself empty, tired, discouraged at my own inadequacies, unable to find the spirit of the Christ Child because I am weighed down too much by the world and myself, I remember the humble prayer of the shepherd. He forgot himself, and looked to Joseph and Our Lady. Admiring them in contemplation before the God-Man, he entered into their spirit and invited Jesus to reign in his soul.

*By Marian Therese Horvat*

### **Prayer**

"O divine Infant, I say to You everything that they are saying to You, because they seem to me so holy and so profoundly recollected. By their countenances, I see they are immersed in divine mysteries that I cannot even imagine. Even though they are dressed simply, everything about them is noble and sublime, while everything about me is low and common, my body as well as my spirit.

"I sense that the things they are thinking and saying to You give You pleasure. The pleasure that they give to You is the pleasure that I myself desire to give to You. Receive, then, those tender endearments and profound consideration that they are making to You as if they came from my own heart and mind."

We pray for our family members who work in hard situations, probably not very learned, but putting their efforts so to sustain their families with their humble work. May they know that they are instruments of God, in bringing their families to love and serve God. Amen

## **8<sup>th</sup> Day**

*Luke 1:57-66*

**ZACHARIAH AND INN-KEEPERS**  
**Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue**  
**loosed,**  
**and he spoke, blessing God**

**The Silence of Zacharias: A Lesson in the Promise of Christmas**



## **Dear fellow-servants—you who have Christ and therefore lack nothing:**

Advent is a time of action and motion, a time of chaos and preparation. “You snooze, you lose” is the mantra of the season. Even as I say such things many of you might well find yourselves reminded of (and thereby distracted by) that never-ending list of all those things that you still “have to do” before Christmas. This in itself validates the point. Advent is one hectic time.

There is nothing really wrong with that in and of itself. Busy helps to keep us out of trouble and makes the days go faster—“Idle hands are the Devil’s tools” and all that. The problem is when we lack balance. In this case the problem is when we don’t balance the busy time with necessary downtime or quiet time—the human body and the human soul require both.

To this end we will rely, in part, on our worship services this Advent season to afford us time for some of the necessary “down time” that we don’t seem to be able to find elsewhere.

The theme of this reflection is: “The Silent Christmas.”

The first of three meditations centers around the account of a man who was actually forced by an angel to close his mouth and to open instead both his ears and his heart to the Word and promise of God. That man is Zacharias, the father of John the Baptist, and the account of his experience is found in the Gospel of Luke, the first chapter:

So far the very words of our God, given to mankind through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Each time we are reminded of the origin of these words their true value is magnified in our hearts and minds. To prepare ourselves for the study of these words we pray: “Sanctify us through your truth, O Lord. Your word is truth.” Amen.

What a fascinating study is presented to us in the person and character of Zacharias. More than just a “good guy” in the eyes of the world, Zacharias was righteous in the only way that really matters. Our text tells us that he was “righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless.” [v.6] Some have been disturbed by these words because they read them not with the eyes and understanding of Christian faith, but as the world reads them. “Righteous before God” in no way indicates that Zacharias was without sin and had thereby earned his way into the good graces of his God by keeping the Law of God. “Righteous before God” we rightly understand as a forensic or judicial term. God is the one who declares righteous for no man is without sin. God declared Zacharias to be “not guilty” because of his faith in the promise of a Savior—a faith all the more remarkable because it still resided in the hearts of the faithful remnant of Israel after so many centuries.

But don’t we read that Zacharias also “walked in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless”? In man’s eyes, certainly, for Zacharias’ neighbors undoubtedly knew him as a good guy. As far as man could see, Zacharias was blameless. You might say the same about several of your friends and neighbors. God,

however, saw the man's heart. There He found plenty of sin also in Zacharias, but nonetheless regarded him as righteous because of his faith in the coming Savior. Today's text certainly bears this out, for a sinless man does not doubt the word of an angel of God. Nor does a perfect, sinless man tremble with fear in the presence of holiness.

So we find this man, Zacharias, faithfully serving in the temple where he is visited by God's holy messenger. Don't miss either the moment or the irony here. That visit to Zacharias was the first public announcement from God Himself that the time of fulfillment was finally at hand. That great event, eagerly anticipated since the Fall in the Garden of Eden, had arrived. The earth shattering, civilization altering event was begun at this moment!

The irony of this great moment is that the promise of the long-awaited New Covenant was given there among the symbols of the Old. An Old Testament priest with his incense burner working in the place of daily sacrifices was told that the time of the Great Sacrifice and of the New Covenant had finally arrived.

Yet what exactly was the reaction of this righteous, God-fearing, promise-believing priest when he received the news that would forever alter the course of world events and usher in a new relationship between God and mankind? He reacted with skepticism and doubt. Why? Why would a righteous man not simply leap for joy and shout the good news?

Maybe because it is relatively easy for us to believe in promises when they are abstract and impersonal and much more difficult when they are concrete and individual.

Try that on for size in your own personal life and see how it fits. Don't you find it easy to agree that "God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself, not charging their sins to them" (2 Corinthians 5:19) when you think in terms of "the world," but then find it much more difficult to say, "God was in Christ, reconciling me to Himself, not charging my sins to my own spiritual account"? Easier to believe that "God loves sinners" than to imagine that "God also could love me." Yet for the first to be true, the second must also be true. God loves sinners, you are a sinner, therefore, God loves you.

Zacharias believed that God would send a Savior, but that confidence just seemed to fall apart when he became involved. His confidence was shaken when he ran, head-first, into the wall of his own reason. The "reason problem" was that he and his wife were too old to have a child. Sounds kind of silly to us, in this context, doesn't it? Zacharias undoubtedly knew the story of his ancestor Abraham who was also given a son long after the normal time for such things. Doubting the word of an angel is silly enough in itself, how much more so to doubt when it had happened before and given the fact that he was talking to an angel—an angel who was announcing a miraculous message of the miraculous promise and telling him that it was going to be achieved via a miraculous birth. To put it another way, Zacharias believed that the promise would one day be fulfilled, he believed that he was talking to an angel, he believed that a

similar old-age birth had once taken place, but nonetheless he doubted the angel's message, when his own frailties entered the picture.

The result was that the mighty Gabriel gave Zacharias something of a "time out." Because of his words of doubt, he was not allowed to utter another word (doubting or otherwise) until the day that God's holy promise, delivered here by His angel, was fulfilled. The forced silence served to remove Zacharias from the hustle and bustle of the next 40 weeks and afforded him the time to contemplate both the angel's message and his own reaction to it.

In Zacharias' case, the angel-imposed silence was golden.

At the birth of the child, note that Zacharias did not say, "His name shall be John" as though he himself was doing the naming. He said simply, "His name is John," acknowledging the word and promise of his God.

The necessary lessons had been learned. It is God who determines what will be and what will not be. Man's doubt or skepticism never alters God's truth. God had predetermined the role Zacharias' son would play as he had also determined the boy's name. Perhaps it took some quiet time for Zacharias to be reminded, some down time before he came to terms with such things.

Make similar time for yourself during this busy season. Stop talking long enough to listen—to listen to that blessed promise and to apply it to yourself and to your own eternal future. Remove this season from the superficial, and anchor it firmly in the concrete. You and I do that whenever the promise of the Gospel ceases to be some vague promise to the world, and instead floods my world with the peace of sins forgiven. The message of Christmas becomes real and personal whenever you and I, through faith, recognize that Jesus did not just leave the perfection of Heaven to save others, He left Heaven and was made man to save me.

Sometimes life is just too loud to hear such things—such blessed, comforting, revitalizing truths. Let it not be so with you and me this holiday season. Amen.

*By Michael J. Roehl*

## **Prepare Him Room**

The season of Advent is beginning again. Advent — a season, so full of tradition, so full of memory, so full of legend. And a season so full, often over-full, bustling and bursting with the exhausting activity of keeping traditions, creating memories, and recalling legends.

And as Advent begins, Luke comes to us, as a kind of holy ghost of Christmas past, bidding us to lay aside for the moment our Christmas lists, leave the half-trimmed tree, pause the holiday movie, dry our hands from washing the cookie pans, and follow him. And as we do, all we see begins to swirl into an unfamiliar darkness.

Suddenly, we find ourselves standing in what we somehow know is a small, ancient Palestinian village on an unusually starry night. The shapes and shadows of buildings look strange. The human and animal noises sound strange. The smoky scents of fire,



foods, burning oils, and manure smell strange. The utter absence of electric lighting is strange. We reach for our smartphone. It's dead.

### **Disturbing Advent Sight**

Luke leads us beyond the village and down a dark, twisting rocky path to some ignored, ignoble spot where we suddenly come upon a sight that we find surprisingly disturbing. Not ten feet away, asleep on the ground, near a small fire that has burned down to embers, is a peasant girl. She has bits of straw in her long, messy, dark hair, and she is wrapped in dirty cloaks and a blanket. A split-second look tells us how difficult this night has been for her. And she is so young.

Even more distressing, we see beside her a small, crude, dirty feeding trough in which lays a sleeping newborn, wrapped tightly in unsanitary, blood-smeared cloths.

We take a few tentative steps forward. We know this child, and we know this girl. But the scene is strange to us. It does not look anything like the manger scenes and illustrated books of our childhood. Our Advent traditions did not prepare us for the earthy realness of the real Advent.

Mary is not serene. She's bone weary. And no divine, heavenly glow emanates from the child. He is not even especially beautiful (Isaiah 53:2). In fact, there is nothing about this child to suggest the unfathomable mystery of who he is. We are unnerved to realize that, had we not already known, we would not have recognized him at all.

This scene, the real Christmas, has nothing of the feeling of the Christmas we know. It has all the feel of undesired, desperate homelessness — more like a scene we'd find under a bridge than under our Christmas tree. And we are hit with the shock of a truth we've known all our lives: This young girl just gave birth to a baby — *the Baby* — in a pasture!

Our visceral response is pity and sadness. This poor girl and her baby! We know this story, but as we see it as it really was, it seems so wrong. Our impulse is to do something to help them. We look incredulously at Luke. He, calmly looking from the child to us, quietly says, "There was no place for them in the inn" (Luke 2:7). No place? No place besides a field for the Maker of the world? The cosmic incongruity stuns us. "Surely we can find some room somewhere!" we respond. "Can you?" Luke replies. Then he turns and begins back up the path.

We look back at the girl and the child, just as Palestinian darkness begins to swirl with a familiar light.

### **Prepare Him Room**

Suddenly, we find ourselves standing where Luke had found us. There are the Christmas lists, the half-trimmed tree, the holiday movie paused, and pans in the sink. The familiar stress of the bustling and bursting schedule of Advent activities reawakens.

But seared in our minds is the pathetic picture of the holy, homeless mother and child. Bustling and bursting Bethlehem had no room for the advent of Jesus. And echoing in our ears are our own words, "Surely we can find some room somewhere!" Can we?

The real Christmas was nothing like the Christmas we've come to know, with its traditions, memories, and legends. It was a desperate moment that occurred for a desperate reason.

The Word became flesh (John 1:14) so that the Word could become sin for us condemned sinners, and die for us that we might be made righteous in him (2 Corinthians 5:21). He was born outside a village and he died outside a city. "He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him" (John 1:10).

At this time of Advent, call to mind the only detail the Holy Spirit, who inspired Luke's writing, decided to provide us about the actual birth of Jesus: Mary had to lay him in a manger because there was no room for them in the inn.

It is no less ironic that Jesus can stand on the periphery of our busy Advent activities than it was that he, the Son of David, lay in a manger in a field on the periphery of the city of David.

Therefore, as we approach Christmas, "let every heart prepare him room." Surely we can find some room somewhere.

*By Jon Bloom*

## **Prayer**

How silently, how silently, the wondrous Gift is given. So God imparts to human hearts the blessings of His heaven. No ear may hear His coming, but in this world of sin, where meek souls will receive Him still, the dear Christ enters in. Bless us oh Lord, so to recognize you in our lives, and to trust in your work and design. Come, Lord Jesus!

## **9<sup>th</sup> Day**

*Luke 1:67-79*

### **THE THREE WISE MEN Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has visited and redeemed his people**



Every Advent we prepare ourselves for the birth of our Lord with lights, lights and more lights. We string lights on Christmas trees, wreaths and Nativity sets; we outline windows, rooftops and walkways. We decorate our downtown trees and light poles with lights and some neighborhood yards are aglow with lighted reindeer, snowmen and Nativity scenes. Our desire to celebrate Christmas with lights brings to mind the very first words God spoke in Creation, "Let there be light" (Gn 1:3).

But there is a deeper and more profound light to discover – it's the light, the star, discovered by the Three Kings. As an

Old Testament prophecy says, “A star shall advance from Jacob, and a scepter shall rise from Israel” (Nm 24:17).

The Jewish scribes and scholars missed this special light, but the Three Kings did not. While Matthew 2:1 calls them, “magi from the east” other prophetic Scriptures refer to them as wise men and kings, “Arise! Shine, for your light has come, the glory of the Lord has dawned upon you ... Nations shall walk by your light, and kings by the radiance of your dawning ... Caravans of camels shall cover you, dromedaries of Midian and Ephah; All from Sheba shall come bearing gold and frankincense and heralding the praises of the Lord,” (Is 60:1-14).

Tradition tells us their names were Melchior, Gaspar and Balthasar, and in 2005 during World Youth Day, Pope Benedict XVI venerated their relics at the Cathedral of Cologne saying, “It was as though they had always been waiting for that star. It was as if the journey had always been part of their destiny and was finally about to begin.”

The vocation of the Three Kings was to follow a star that would change their lives as prophesied in sacred Scripture: “May the kings of Tarshish and the islands bring tribute, the kings of Sheba and Seba offer gifts. May all kings bow before him, all nations serve him ... Long may he live, receiving gold from Arabia” (Ps 72:10-15).

They came from different countries and from the ends of the earth traveling for two years with one burning question in their hearts. This question persuaded them to leave their kingdoms, their treasures, and the comforts of their lives. This question so consumed them day and night that they were willing to endure danger, difficulty, discomfort and displacement from their very thrones. The question for them was and for all Christians now is, “Where is the newborn king?” (Mt 2:2).

They “never yielded to discouragement or the temptation to give up and go home. Now that they were so close to their goal they had no other question than this,” Pope Benedict XVI said.

As they neared the source of light, the star suddenly disappeared from their sight. Their life was darkened. There was no light to follow. Did they give up and lose hope? No, in their zeal they dared to speak with Herod.

History tells us that Herod not only killed all the children 2 years of age and younger trying to destroy Jesus, but he even put his adult sons to death when they threatened his throne. Therefore, these Three Kings, having lost sight of the star, risked everything in approaching Herod about the question smoldering in their hearts.

As soon as the Three Kings left Herod’s presence, the star reappeared, “And behold, the star that they had seen at its rising preceded them until it came and stopped over the place where the child was. They were overjoyed at seeing the star” (Mt 2:9-10).

Despite doubts, reservations and fear in their hearts at having lost sight of the star, they did not give up. They were obedient to the desire in their hearts to seek the star. Like the magi, we must observe the signs with which God is calling and guiding us.

“When we are conscious of being led by him, our heart experiences authentic and deep joy as well as a powerful desire to meet him and a persevering strength to follow him obediently,” Pope Benedict XVI said.

The Three Kings completed their journey and discovered their true vocation as the first believers, worshippers and witnesses of Jesus. Upon their encounter with the newborn Jesus, "The magi are filled with awe by what they see; heaven on earth and earth in heaven; man in God and God in man; they see enclosed in a tiny body the One whom the entire world cannot contain," St. Peter Chrysologus wrote in the fifth century.

At the end of the journey, they no longer needed the star to return home since they had the true light of Jesus in their hearts lighting their way. They then went peacefully via another route. The practical reason for taking a different route was to flee Herod. But the spiritual reason was because they had been changed. When we encounter Jesus, our lives change and we can no longer pursue the same path we were traveling. We too must leave our old route of sin and never return the same way we came so that we can nourish and guard the new light of Christ that is in our hearts.

This Christmas let us take time to look at all the Christmas lights and stars that abound. Let us ask Jesus for the special light of grace to discover him as "the newborn King" truly present in the Eucharist. Let us ask him to reveal our vocation as his believers, worshippers and witnesses.

*By Deacon Guadalupe Rodriguez*

## **Prayer**

What was it in that natal star pre-eminent in the night-time sky that stirred the hearts and imaginations of those magi from the east was it colour brightness conjunction or more a still small voice whispering in the darkness of the world. 'This is the sign that will proceed the birth of he who fulfils the prophets' words.' That still small voice which whispers still to our conscience and soul still leads if we will but follow to the stable door.



Consolata Shrine, Westlands  
[www.consolatashrine.org](http://www.consolatashrine.org)