

Sacred Space Advent Retreat 2008

Introduction to the Advent Retreat

Christianity affirms that a man, Jesus Christ, is at the same time God. In this it stands alone among the religions of the world. Christians claim that the God of the Jews, the Muslims, of all the great world religions, has become incarnate in a man, Jesus of Nazareth. This presents a difficulty to Muslim and Jewish people and to all religions and pious people of yesterday and today who venerate and adore a transcendent God – a God who is totally other, a God beyond this world, infinite, eternal, incomprehensible and above everything that human beings can be and know.

Advent is a good time to pray and reflect on this central truth of the Christian religion. By doing so, we can learn something about the meaning of our own lives, of our roots and of true humanity. By meditating on the human life of Jesus Christ, God become human for us, we discover that our lives have a purpose and a goal, summed up in the newborn boy child, Jesus. If you want to see what our God is like, look into the manger.

Time

It takes time to take in such a radical truth because it takes God time to bring the truth about God home to us. To find the time to spend with God we will have to take time from something else, be it listening to the radio or to music, watching TV, texting, phoning or partying with our friends.

Place

Time isn't all you'll require. You will also need to choose a place to spend time with God. Of course we can pray anywhere, just as we can spend time with friends anywhere. But some places are better than others when it comes to spending time with a friend. On a bus or in a car is better than on a bicycle, on a walk is better than a noisy pub! A place where you can be alone with your friend and not be interrupted is best. If you are to spend 'quality time' with God it is best to find a place where you can be alone and not be interrupted. You may have to experiment to find somewhere that works for you; when you do, stick to it.

Decisions

Three decisions are required.

- 1) To make this Advent Retreat you have to decide to commit to making three periods of prayer and reflection between now and Christmas Day.
- 2) Having decided to make the Retreat you will have to decide whether you will devote a particular day to the Retreat or devote some time on each of three days.
- 3) You will have to decide how long you will spend on each prayer period. It is best to fix the length of time, be it 30, 40, 50 or 60 minutes and commit beforehand to not reducing the time decided. You can always increase the time, of course!

Now you are ready to go!

Advent

Advent is about waiting and wanting. All of the Advent people are waiting – Zechariah and Elizabeth are waiting, Mary and Joseph are waiting, Simeon and Anna are waiting. We are invited to wait, to want. We are invited to get in touch with our longing for someone or something to come along and bring new meaning into our lives.

Jesus, God made man, was born in ordinary surroundings so there is no need to look for the extraordinary, the spectacular or the miraculous during Advent. God can be found where we live; in our kitchens, at our tables, in our places of work, in each others' faces. There was no prior publicity regarding his coming, no expensive advertising, no claim to privilege, just a silent, humble entry. Jesus' coming into any life will be similar. Be ready to be surprised. We tend to look for Jesus everywhere, except in the place where the incarnation took place: our flesh. Incarnation means, taking flesh, and by taking flesh, Christ crawled into ordinary life and invites us to meet Him there.

Two options are offered here

Option 1: [A one-day retreat](#)

Option 2: [One prayer session on each of three days](#)

Option 1: One-day retreat

Make yourself a timetable for the day. Here is a suggestion that you can adapt to suit your circumstances.

- 9.30am: Preparation: Take some time to prepare a place for your prayer; have the Scripture passages you propose to use to hand; recall you are spending the day with God; write down what you want from the day, what you hope will happen.
- 10.00am: [First Prayer Session](#) (Luke 1:26-37)
- 11.00am: Take a break – take a stretch, walk around, have some refreshment, review the prayer period.
- 11.30am: [Second Prayer Session](#) (Luke 1:39-56)
- 12.30pm: Lunch break – review the prayer period.
- 2.30pm: [Third Prayer Session](#) (Matthew 1:18-25)
- 3.30pm: Take a break – take a stretch, walk around, have some refreshment, review the prayer period.
- 4.00pm: [Review the day](#).

Option 2: One prayer session on each of three days.

Preparation: 15 minutes
Prayer Session: 60 minutes (or whatever you decided)
Review of prayer period: 15minutes

- [First prayer session](#)
- [Second prayer session](#)
- [Third prayer session](#)

First Prayer Session

Getting started

Go to the place you have decided on for your prayer. Rather than drift into prayer, indicate to yourself that you are beginning your prayer. You might, for example, make the sign of the cross or bow – and take up a posture that helps you be in touch with God. Try to become quiet, still, exteriorly and interiorly.

Presence

Recall that you want to get in touch with a Person, and that that Person is God – Father and/or Son and/or Holy Spirit. Recall too that God wants to get in touch with you. Become present to each other; notice God noticing you. How does God look at you? How do you look at God?

Companion in prayer

Ask the Holy Spirit for help in your prayer. “Come Holy Spirit, teach me to pray; help me to do it.”

Desire

Get in touch with what you want from God here and now, and ask for it? To know God more? To love God more? To serve God better? Deeper trust? Stronger hope? Forgiveness? Compassion?

Read and reread the scripture passage slowly, pausing wherever and whenever you feel drawn to do so.

Scripture passage

Luke 1:26-37

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, 'Greetings, favoured one! The Lord is with you.' But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob for ever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.' Mary said to the angel, 'How can this be, since I am a virgin?' The angel said to her, 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God.'

Keeping going

Create the event described above in your own imagination. Imagine the place – just as many an artist has done – where the event took place.

Recall who is involved – Gabriel and Mary. Anybody else? What about you? God became human for your sake so you are involved too. Put yourself in the picture.

Listen to what the persons are saying – to Gabriel and to Mary. Do you want to say anything to either of them? Perhaps you want just to be there noticing what is going on, marvelling at it, wondering at how God does things.

Reflections

Mary has not yet moved in to live with her husband, Joseph. She is a virgin. What is happening to her is not a response to her yearning for a child but a surprise initiative by God which neither she nor Joseph could have anticipated. Mary is the first to hear the Good News – that God so loves the world that He wants to send His only Son as Saviour, as Messiah. Mary is the first to accept the Good News, “I am the handmaid of the Lord,” said Mary, “let what you have said be done to me.” To have said ‘Yes’ to God on this occasion, Mary must have said ‘Yes’ to God before this. To say ‘Yes’ to God on this occasion, Mary must believe Gabriel when he says that nothing is impossible to God.

Mary is blessed not because she is a giver but because she is a receiver. We prefer to think of ourselves as givers. Perhaps there’s not too much wrong with that except that it’s a direct contradiction of the biblical account of the first Christmas. We had little to do with God’s work in Jesus. We didn’t think of it, understand it or approve it. All we can do is, like Mary, receive it – a gift from a God we hardly know! With God we are always receivers.

It’s tough to be on the receiving end of love, God’s or anybody else’s. It requires that we see our lives not as our possessions, but as gifts. That is humbling!

Lord, help me to be like Mary, a receiver of your gifts, to realise that the greatest gift I can give to you is, like Mary, say ‘Yes’ to the gifts you have given, continue to give and want to give me.

Review of Prayer period

How did you get on? Was the prayer time easy or difficult? What was easy about it? What was difficult? If it was easy, give thanks. If it was difficult remember that trying to pray is praying. The important thing is never to give up trying. If you were to repeat this period of prayer, what would you change, if anything? Keep a few notes as you may want to repeat this prayer and return to the easy and/or difficult bits.

Second Prayer Session

Getting started

Go to the place you have decided on for your prayer. Rather than drift into prayer, indicate to yourself that you are beginning your prayer. You might, for example, make the sign of the cross or bow – and take up a posture that helps you be in touch with God. Try to become quiet, still, exteriorly and interiorly.

Presence

Recall that you want to get in touch with a Person, and that that Person is God – Father and/or Son and/or Holy Spirit. Recall too that God wants to get in touch with you. Become present to each other; notice God noticing you. How does God look at you? How do you look at God?

Companion in prayer

Ask the Holy Spirit for help in your prayer. “Come Holy Spirit, teach me to pray; help me to do it.”

Desire

Get in touch with what you want from God here and now, and ask for it? To know God more? To love God more? To serve God better? Deeper trust? Stronger hope? Forgiveness? Compassion?

Read and reread the scripture passage slowly, pausing wherever and whenever you feel drawn to do so.

Scripture passage

Luke 1:39-56

You may prefer to turn again to the first scripture passage above, ([Luke 1:26-37](#)) and repeat that prayer period.

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. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leapt in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, 'Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leapt for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.'

And Mary said,

'My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour,
for he has looked with favour on the lowliness of his servant.
Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
or the Mighty One has done great things for me,
and holy is his name.
His mercy is for those who fear him
from generation to generation.
He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.
He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
and lifted up the lowly;
he has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty.
He has helped his servant Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,
according to the promise he made to our ancestors,
to Abraham and to his descendants forever.'

And Mary remained with her for about three months and then returned to her home.

Keeping going

Create the meeting described above in your own imagination. Imagine Mary's trip to visit Elizabeth – from Nazareth in Galilee, south to Jerusalem. Imagine their meeting, the joy expressed by both pregnant women.

Listen to what Elizabeth and Mary are saying. Put yourself in the scene.

Do I want to say anything further to Mary or Elizabeth, ask them for anything? Do you want to ask God for anything?

Reflections

Mary and Elizabeth are two expectant mothers, awaiting their first children. Both have experienced God intervening in their lives in extraordinary ways. Yet expecting a baby, what could be more ordinary and everyday?

Elizabeth says that Mary is blessed. Why? Because she is the mother of a Son, who is also God's Son, the Messiah? Any other reason why she is blessed? She is doubly blessed because she not only heard the word of God but she believed it. You can't be God's Son's mother but you can hear the word of God, believe it and live it. Do you want to say anything to either of them? Want to ask to believe that God is working in your life too, intervening in it? Perhaps you want just to be there noticing what is going on, marvelling at it, wondering at how God does things. Mary understands that what has happened to her is Good News, for her and for all people. Can you interpret for yourself, and others, what happens at Christmas so that you, and they, will recognise it as Good News?

Review of Prayer period

How did you get on? Was the prayer time easy or difficulty? What was easy about it? What was difficult? If it was easy, give thanks. If it was difficult remember that trying to pray is praying. The important thing is never to give up trying. If you were to repeat this period of prayer, what would you change, if anything? Keep a few notes as you may want to repeat this prayer and return to the easy and/or difficult bits.

Third Prayer Session

Getting started

Go to the place you have decided on for your prayer. Rather than drift into prayer, indicate to yourself that you are beginning your prayer – eg, make the sign of the cross or bow – and take up a posture that helps you be in touch with God. Try to become quiet, still, exteriorly and interiorly.

Presence

Recall that you want to get in touch with a Person, and that that Person is God – Father and/or Son and/or Holy Spirit. Recall too that God wants to get in touch with you. Become present to each other; notice God noticing you. How does God look at you? How do you look at God?

Companion in prayer

Ask the Holy Spirit for help in your prayer. “Come Holy Spirit, teach me to pray; help me to do it.”

Desire

Get in touch with what you want from God here and now, and ask for it? To know God more? To love God more? To serve God better? Deeper trust? Stronger hope? Forgiveness? Compassion?

Read and reread the scripture passage slowly, pausing wherever and whenever you feel drawn to do so.

Scripture passage

Matthew 1:18-25

You may prefer to turn again to either the first or second scripture passages above - [Luke 1:26-37](#) or [Luke 1:39-56](#)

Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. 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. But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, ‘Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.’ All this took place to fulfil what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:

‘Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,
and they shall name him Emmanuel’,

which means, ‘God is with us.’ When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.

Keeping going

Create the event described above in your own imagination. Imagine the place – as an artist might do – imagine where the event takes place. Put yourself there too.

Reflections

Imagine Joseph's dilemma prior to the dream. Since he was not the father of Mary's child, there were only two possibilities – either Mary had been unfaithful to their engagement or she had been forced against her will, and so was innocent. But should he make a public spectacle of Mary by insisting on a formal enquiry to establish the truth? He had decided not to insist on an enquiry but to divorce her quietly. In Matthew's Gospel there is no 'annunciation' to Mary. The 'annunciation' is to Joseph, in a dream, telling him not to divorce Mary, as he had decided, but to complete the marriage process and take her to his house, because her pregnancy was of the Holy Spirit. He was not the father of Mary's baby but nor was any man.

What the angel tells Joseph changes everything. He takes Mary to his house, completes the marriage process and when Mary's baby is born he names him Jesus, thereby declaring that he is Jesus' legal father. What's in a name? Jesus means 'saviour'; Jesus was also called 'Emmanuel' which means, 'God-is-with-us'. "I am with you always to the end of the world." (Matthew 28:20)

What kind of a man, of a father, was Joseph? A believer of God's word? A hearer and doer of that word, like Mary? Upright? Honest with himself and with Mary? Sensitive? Loving? Thoughtful? Think of what he did subsequently for his son, the flight into Egypt, the return from Egypt when it was safe for the child, his reaction to the loss of Jesus in the Temple.

Talk to Joseph about his dilemma and how he resolved it. What of your own dilemmas? Would he be a good person with whom to talk about them? Ask his help to believe, as he did, that God knows our dilemmas, wants to help us. Ask to be able to hear God's help.

Review of Prayer period

How did you get on? Was the prayer time easy or difficulty? What was easy about it? What was difficult? If it was easy, give thanks. If it was difficult remember that trying to pray is praying. The important thing is never to give up trying. If you were to repeat this period of prayer, what would you change, if anything? Keep a few notes as you may want to repeat this prayer and return to the easy and/or difficult bits.

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