

A Retreat for Advent

You need to plan today's retreat, combining the freedom of your own style with certain essentials for a meeting with God – or rather for alerting yourself to God who is present to you all the time. The first and second sessions will prepare you for the Lord's coming; the third session brings you to Bethlehem.

Freedom: You will pray wherever suits you best: maybe walking outside, maybe sitting, standing or kneeling in your room, maybe in a church or chapel.

Space: Moses found holy ground on a deserted mountainside. It may not be so easy for you. Find a place where you will be present to God, and God to you, and where others will not distract you.

Solitude: turn off your mobile phone, radio and TV, in order to create an affective solitude. Leave off your public person, the mask you wear in your social life. Today you face the Lord naked; he sees your heart and loves you as you are. Cut off anything which would break that link with God. Set up a new, slow rhythm. Seek solitude to see things as they are. What are the little things that busyness has magnified unduly? What are the big things I find too little time for? Today is not for doing but for *being*: make no effort to achieve, get things done, gather or possess. Waste time creatively. You are not alone. Each sensation is God's caress. Each breath is saying Yes to God.

Time: Make yourself a timetable for the day. Here is a suggestion, to be adapted to suit your circumstances:

10.30 Session 1: Prepare for prayer

Scripture: the birth of a baby: *What will this child be?*

Playback

11.10 Midmorning Break

11.30 Session 2: Scripture: *John, what should I do?*

Playback

13.00 Midday Break

14.30 Session 3: The story: *Mary and her baby.*

Review of the day

First Session: Passage from Scripture: Luke 1, 57-66:

Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son. Her neighbours and relatives heard that the Lord had shown his great mercy to her, and they rejoiced with her. On the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to name him Zechariah after his father. But his mother said, "No; he is to be called John." They said to her, "None of your relatives has this name." Then they began motioning to his father to find out what name he wanted to give him. He asked for a writing tablet and wrote, "His name is John." And all of them were amazed. Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue freed, and he began to speak, praising God. Fear came over all their neighbours, and all these things were talked about throughout the entire hill country of Judea. All who heard them pondered them and said, "What then will this child become?" For, indeed, the hand of the Lord was with him.

Pause and slow down in God's presence. *Be still and know that I am God.*

Pick a Posture that helps you to pray. You will pray wherever and however suits you best: maybe walking outside, maybe sitting, standing or kneeling in your room, maybe in a church or chapel.

Petition: ask for what you desire: *a sense of God's Providence in my life.*

When Elizabeth's baby was born, the neighbours gathered round observing his features – *who does he look like?* - and endlessly curious about his name - why John? - delighting in the huge expectations that come with every child. *What will he become?*

Mary would have looked back on this episode – in the Rosary we call it the Visitation – as one of the joyful mysteries of her life. She was with a loved cousin, and like any young mother was buoyed up by the promise every new baby offers. Her own baby was still on the way. The birth of Jesus was the next of her joyful mysteries.

I try to look back on my own life through the eyes of my mother, and ask the Lord to give me insight into **my own joyful mysteries**. What hopes and expectations had my father and mother when I came into the world? How did they choose my name? Once upon a time they gathered round my cot, and asked that question about me: *what will s/he become?*

Thank you, Lord, for giving me a life to lead and for the chance to make a fresh start every day. Your hand is with me.

Playback: After this prayer, reflect on it: How was that simple exercise for me? How did it go? What was it like? Consoling? Frustrating? Dry? Did anything stand out for me? Was I moved, lifted or depressed, disturbed or encouraged, by anything? Am I drawn back to an aspect of what I was praying about? What, if anything, altered or changed in me? Reflect on this for a moment. Would one word, or perhaps an image, describe the experience? Perhaps I could write down the word or image.

Second Session

Luke 3: The child grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness until the day he appeared publicly to Israel. The word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, Crowds came out to be baptized by him and asked him, "What then should we do?" In reply he said to them, "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise." Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, "Teacher, what should we do?" He said to them, "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you." Soldiers also asked him, "And we, what should we do?" He said to them, "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages." As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah.

The attraction of John the Baptist is mysterious. People flocked to him, not to be flattered but to be told the truth. They listened because of what they saw, a man who was indifferent to the world's prizes, a man of minimal needs, who could not be bought by pleasures, comforts or money, but passionate about God. They recognised holiness.

I see myself joining the crowds at the Jordan. I seek out this remarkable young man, clad in camelhair and living on locusts and wild honey, and I ask him: *What should I do?*

John looks calmly into my eyes, and suggests that there are parts of me that are not free, appetites that can work against me, distort my actions, divert my love. I look into myself and pick out the areas of unfreedom. My friends could tell me what they are, the bits that make me harder to live with. How can I tackle them, to prepare the way for the Lord?

John tells me, too, that I could have more love in my life. It is not enough to be well-behaved and controlled. How can I love God and love others more genuinely?

Lord, I linger on this question: *What should I do?* Teach me, so that I may bring a better me to you at Christmas.

Playback: After this prayer, reflect on it, as above.

Third Session:

This will be a contemplation, imagining the stable in Bethlehem as it is captured in thousands of cribs all over the world. In his Christmas play *Bar-Jona*, Jean-Paul Sartre pictures Mary, Jesus and Joseph:

The Virgin is pale, and she looks at the baby. What I would paint on her face is an anxious wonderment, such as has never before been seen on a human face. For Christ is her baby, flesh of her flesh, and the fruit of her womb. She has carried him for nine months, and she will give him her breast, and her milk will become the blood of God. There are moments when the temptation is so strong that she forgets that he is God. She folds him in her arms and says: *My little one.*

But at other moments she feels a stranger, and she thinks: *God is there* – and she finds herself caught by a religious awe before this speechless God, this terrifying infant. All mothers at times are brought up sharp in this way before this fragment of themselves, their baby. They feel themselves in exile at two paces from this new life that they have created from their life, and which is now peopled by another's thoughts. But no other baby has been so cruelly and suddenly snatched from his mother, for he is God, and he surpasses in every way anything that she can imagine. It is a hard trial for a mother to be ashamed of herself and her human condition before her son.

But I think that there are other rapid, fleeting moments when she realises at once that Christ is her son, her very own baby, and that he is

God. She looks at him and thinks: *This God is my baby. This divine flesh is my flesh. He is made from me. He has my eyes, and the curve of his mouth is the curve of mine. He is like me. He is God and he is like me.*

No other woman has been lucky enough to have a God for herself alone, a tiny little God whom she can take in her arms and cover with kisses, a warm-bodied God who smiles and breathes, a God that she can touch, who is alive. And it is in these moments that I would paint Mary, if I was a painter, and I would try to capture the air of radiant tenderness and timidity with which she lifts her finger to touch the sweet skin of her baby-God, whose warm weight she feels on her knees, and who smiles.

So much for Jesus and for the Virgin Mary.

And Joseph? I would not paint Joseph. I would show no more than a shadow at the back of the stable, and two shining eyes. For I do not know what to say about Joseph, and Joseph does not know what to say about himself. He adores, and is happy to adore, and he feels himself slightly out of it. I believe he suffers without admitting it. He suffers because he sees how much this woman whom he loves resembles God; how she is already at the side of God. For God has burst like a bomb into the intimacy of this family. Joseph and Mary are separated for ever by this explosion of light. And I imagine that all through his life Joseph will be learning to accept this.

Like Joseph I may look at this scene of mother and child all my life long, but never plumb all its depths. I linger in Bethlehem and know that I am at the heart of Christmas.

Review of the day: At the end of the day, reflect on the three sessions. See what you would like to retain from the day, in the shape of a picture, or phrase, or resolution. Ease yourself slowly back into the routine of daily living.

From Sacred Space (<http://www.sacredspace.ie>)