

Bishop Bradley's Reflections on the Sunday Readings

December 20, 2015 Fourth Sunday of Advent

Today we begin the fourth, and final "week" of Advent, though since Christmas is just five days away, it's the shortest "week" of the year. But as brief as it is, it is still very important and well-worth our time to prayerfully reflect on these beautiful Scripture Readings.

Throughout this brief Advent season, we have been given the spiritual opportunity to prepare our hearts to be open to all the graces that God wants to bring into our lives, not only during this new Liturgical Year, but also during this Extraordinary Jubilee Year of Mercy which we have just begun. However, as we all know, it's almost impossible to avoid the rush and hurry of getting ourselves ready for the "holiday" side of the Christmas celebration. I have to admit that yesterday, I was one of the millions of people participating in what has come to be known as "Super Saturday," doing last minute Christmas shopping. During these days, there is so much to do as we write our Christmas cards, do our Christmas baking, buy our precious gifts, and get them all wrapped and ready to be delivered to our loved ones throughout these coming days.

Still, it is so important that we make every effort to focus our thoughts and attention on this final Advent Sunday and reflect on the special spiritual Advent gifts that are available to each of us in the midst of the busy-ness of our daily responsibilities and life circumstances.

First, there is the gift of "stillness." Tomorrow, we will experience the "winter solstice"--- the shortest day of the year in terms of daylight, which means that it is possible, due to the greatest amount of darkness, there is more of an opportunity for "stillness" on that day than any other, assuming that we find darkness conducive to restfulness, quiet and inner stillness. The entire Advent season provides each of us with that same opportunity to take time to be "still" and know that God is our loving God; to remember that our God loves us so much that He comes to dwell among us. Our God asks us to remember in that stillness of our hearts that we are His, and He is with us always. As the prophet Micah told us in today's First Reading: "*Therefore the Lord...shall stand firm and shepherd his flock...he shall be peace.*" He very clearly states that He does not come to bring peace, but to be peace itself!

Another Advent "gift" is joy. Advent joy reminds us that we are always living in expectation for what is still to come; we continue "*waiting in joyful hope*" for all the ways that our God reveals Himself to us. Advent joy comes from knowing that we are deeply loved by our

God Who Jesus came to tell us we can dare to call “Father”. In today’s Gospel, when Mary visited Elizabeth, there was such an expression of joy in that meeting that Elizabeth’s unborn child *‘leaped for joy’* in Elizabeth’s womb, and she herself proclaimed to Mary: *“Blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb....and how is it that the mother of my Lord should come to me?”* St. John Paul in reflecting on the Visitation wrote: “The mystery of the Visitation is a mystery of joy”.

A third Advent gift to think about is “light.” Our Advent Wreath has been getting brighter and brighter throughout these four weeks; it is now complete giving off a beautiful external light that we hope and pray is also internally reflected within our hearts as well. Of course at times we all experience “dark” moments of grief, pain, or tragedy; yet our faith assures us that no darkness can be overwhelming when we are connected to Christ, the Light of the world.

Our dear Blessed Mother is our Advent Model. As we think about the gifts of stillness, joy and light, and certainly see each of those gifts within Mary, we might ask ourselves how strong our connection to our Blessed Mother is, the first of all believers, and the first one to proclaim the Good News---the first Evangelist. And so it only makes sense that we should “model” Mary’s faith, her joy, her trust, her submission to God’s will in our own lives. When we are facing fears, when we are confused about the way our lives are unfolding, when we are filled with grief, when we are asked to accept something in life that seems too difficult to bear, that is when we need to call on our Blessed Mother, because she has been there, and she has dealt with similar issues. Mary will remind us that we too are truly blessed and special in God’s sight. She will remind us that the “fruit” of our lives should be that we allow Christ to be born within our hearts. She will remind us that when we believe in God and trust that He is with us always, we too are helping to build God’s kingdom in this world.

As we conclude this Advent 2015, enter more fully into this Year of Mercy, and prepare to celebrate the true joy of Christmas, I hope that each of us will allow Mary, our Blessed Mother, to be our Model and our inspiration, not just during the seasons of Advent and Christmas, but in all the seasons of our lives. May we regularly and fervently pray our Mother of Mercy’s beautiful Prayer of Praise: *“My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord; my spirit rejoices in God my Savior”*.

God bless you, now and always.

Faithfully yours in Christ,

+ Bishop Paul J. Bradley

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