

December 18, 2016 Fourth Sunday of Advent

Bishop Bradley's Reflections on the Sunday Readings

This year, as we gather to celebrate the Fourth Sunday of Advent, we not only get to celebrate this Sunday, but the full fourth week of Advent. That's not always the case; there are times when the Fourth Week of Advent lasts only a day or two depending on when Christmas falls. I for one am happy about that, not just because there's more time to complete the "last minute" preparations for Christmas, but also because there's more of a sense of completeness to our Advent preparation. These mid-December, pre-official-winter days have given us some pretty frigid temperatures and the lake-effect snow machine simply doesn't want to stop; as one of the traditional Christmas songs puts it, the "weather outside is frightful".

No matter what the weather outside is, on this Fourth Sunday of Advent the stage is set: the fourth candle on the Advent wreath is lit and all is ready for Christmas just one week from today. Whether we are ready for the "holiday" side of Christmas or not is one thing; but the truly important question is: are we ready for the "holyday" side of Christmas? Have we spiritually prepared ourselves to once again celebrate the coming of Christ into our world? Have we made a good Christmas confession in the Sacrament of Reconciliation? As we put up our manger scenes at home, have we reflected on the spiritual implications of our God Who loves us so much that He would allow His only-begotten Son---His Word of Love spoken so forcefully that He became the Word made Flesh---to become One with us in the Person of Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior?

The Scripture Readings for this Fourth Sunday of Advent truly help us to complete our spiritual preparations for Christmas. Over these past few weeks, the Scripture Readings have spoken about the "longing" and the "waiting" for the coming of the Messiah for generations of people before Christ. We've heard from Isaiah, the great Advent Prophet, who continually encouraged people to Hope in the "Day of the Lord" when the Messiah would come to save them; we've seen John the Baptist, the one who was the last of the Old Testament prophets who made the final preparations by making straight the way for the Lord before Jesus began His public ministry; and we heard about the Archangel Gabriel who announced to Mary that she had been chosen to be the Mother of the Savior, and with her "Yes/Fiat", the Word became flesh in her womb through the power of the Holy Spirit. Today's Readings give us the promise, and

through the “obedience in faith” of St. Joseph, Mary’s betrothed, God’s Plan allows the promise to become real.

In today’s First Reading, Isaiah reveals God’s sign and makes the promise for all eternity: “*the virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall name him Emmanuel.*” In our Second Reading from the Letter to the Romans, St. Paul describes himself as one who was able to “*bring about the obedience of faith*”. He had to be thinking about St. Joseph when he wrote that because that is exactly what he was doing as we heard in today’s beautiful Gospel passage. We see Joseph for the first time this Advent who found himself in a true dilemma---a huge crisis. His beloved Mary, to whom he was betrothed, was found to be pregnant. From the human/rational perspective, there was no doubt in his mind what had happened; and Joseph knew well what the Mosaic law dictated as punishment for infidelity: death! The Angel Gabriel came to Joseph in a dream and said: “*Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary your wife into your home.*” The Angel explained that Mary had become pregnant as part of God’s amazing Plan to save the world, and that his part in the Plan was critical so it could proceed. The most important part of that message for Joseph was “Do not be afraid!” With that message, Joseph became “obedient in faith” since there was no human/rational explanation that would suffice; he took Mary into his home, and the Promise was able to be fulfilled. Now, the stage for that event that would change the history of the world was truly set because Mary and Joseph both said “Yes” when their minds were saying “this doesn’t make sense”. They set aside their human fears and doubts and became “obedient in faith”.

These Readings for this Fourth Sunday of Advent are so reassuring to all of us in our own day and time. In spite of the “frightful weather”, or whatever other circumstances we might be facing in our lives, God’s Word continues to assure us that the Promise made through Isaiah the Prophet continues to be a reality in our world: “God is with us”----Emmanuel! And we continue to be assured by our loving God: “Do not be afraid; place your trust in God and allow His Love to fill you with His Christmas spirit.”

That is what makes Christmas so special: Emmanuel---God is with us! In the midst of our problems, worries, fears and concerns, our God has come to make His dwelling not only among us, but within our hearts as well. Our God is with us through the Sacraments, especially through that good Christmas confession you have made or will make this week; our God is most especially and most really with us in the Holy Eucharist; our God remains with us always through the teachings and guidance of the Church.

But as we complete our Christmas preparations, and are filled with the joy and hope of this season, we have to keep in mind that Christmas begins what Easter completes. The beauty and wonder of Christmas leads directly to the wood of the Cross and the glory of Easter. The Opening Prayer for today's Mass sums it up so well. If you pray the Angelus regularly, it will sound very familiar: *"Pour forth we beseech You, O Lord, Your grace into our hearts, that we, to whom the Incarnation of Christ Your Son was made known by the message of an Angel, may by His Passion and Cross be brought to the glory of His Resurrection."*

Mary, our Blessed Mother, and Joseph our great example of faith, are our two models for how we can allow ourselves to be filled with the joy of Christmas by imitating their courageous and obedient faith. Our God has come to be with us and remains with us always. Once we hear, and truly pay attention, to the message of the Angel---"*Do not be afraid*"---then we will be able to see, feel and hear God's abiding Presence in our lives. We will be able to realize that Christmas doesn't just come at the end of the fourth Week of Advent on December 25th; Christmas has changed the world forever because God is with us, and will never leave us.

God bless you now and always!

Faithfully yours in Christ,

+ Bishop Paul J. Bradley