

December 23, 2018 Fourth Sunday of Advent

Bishop Bradley's Reflections on the Sunday Readings

Today we begin the fourth, and final "week" of Advent, which actually is the shortest "week" in the whole liturgical year; since Christmas is Tuesday, the fourth "week" of Advent lasts only two days. But as brief as it is, it's still very important and well-worth our reflection on these beautiful Scripture Readings.

Advent is this brief season, which comes at the beginning of each new Liturgical Year. Advent is more than a time to get ready for Christmas; Advent has its own special nature and purpose, which is to prepare, that is get make ready, our hearts to be open to all the graces that God wants to bring into our lives during this new cycle of Feasts and liturgical seasons in this new Church Year. But as much as we might know that, and perhaps each year resolve to "let Advent be Advent", it's nearly impossible to avoid the rush and hurry of getting ourselves ready for the "holiday" side of the Christmas celebration. We almost can't help but be distracted from Advent by the many hours it take to 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 days.

But for these few minutes, let's try to briefly focus our thoughts and attention on this final Sunday of Advent as we 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". It was just three days ago that we experienced the "winter solstice"---the shortest day of the year in terms of daylight, which means that theoretically, due to more 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. Advent provides each of us with that 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 the 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."*

Another Advent gift is “joy”. Advent joy reminds us that we are always living in expectation for what is still to come; “*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 told us, we can **dare** to call “Father”. In today’s Gospel, when Mary visited Elizabeth, there was such an expression of joy as Elizabeth realized that Mary was pregnant with the very Son of God, and proclaimed: “*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?*” In addition, the unborn child in Elizabeth’s womb also expressed joy by “leaping for joy” in his mother’s womb.

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 reflected within our hearts as well. Of course we all at times 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 such an important Advent figure, and having recently consecrated our entire Diocese to her intercession, she is our special advocate and our role model. As we think about the gifts of ***stillness, joy and light***, and clearly see each of those gifts within Mary, we might ask ourselves how strong our connection is to our Blessed Mother, the first of all believers, and the first one to proclaim the Good News---the first Evangelist? It only makes sense that we should “model” Mary, her 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’s 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 2018 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 the final

part of the beautiful prayer, the Hail Mary, and apply it always to ourselves: *“Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death. Amen.”*

God bless you, now and always.

Faithfully yours in Christ,

+ Bishop Paul J. Bradley

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