

## Saturday 24 December

Scripture: 2 Samuel 7: 1-5, 8-12, Psalm 88, Luke 1: 67-79

*Zechariah said,*

*'By the tender mercy of our God,  
the dawn from on high will break upon us,  
to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death,  
to guide our feet into the way of peace.'*

This is one of the longest, darkest nights of the year – but the darkness Zechariah speaks of is not just of night-time. Tonight, many people will be living with the darkness of hunger, fear, war, unemployment and so much more. Many will wonder whether there is going to be light in their lives again. God does not enter the world in a massive blaze of glory that no-one could fail to notice. Instead, he comes as a small light into a dark stable in a dark town in a dark country living under occupation. But he does not keep the light to himself but hands it on to others so that this light, 'divided but undimmed' will bring light into the dark places of the world – if those who receive it are willing to carry it there.

- Where are the places of darkness that need the light of Christ tonight
- How might you carry your own "little light" into a place of darkness – in prayer and in person?

At some point this evening, try to find time to sit in the dark and to be in solidarity with those living with various forms of darkness. See whether someone – or a particular situation – comes to your mind and focus your prayer of light on them. Reflect on how you might bring light to them in other ways.



# Daily Reflections



Week Beginning Sunday 18 December 2016  
(Fourth Sunday of Advent Year A)  
to  
Saturday 23 December 2016

## Sunday 18 December – Fourth Sunday of Advent

Scripture: Isaiah 7: 10-14; Psalm 23; Romans 1: 1-7; Matthew 1: 18-24

*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.'*

Joseph is described as a righteous man and must have been devastated when the young woman he is engaged to is found to be pregnant. Mary came from a good family and would, no doubt, have had a reputation as a devoted young Jew with a great love of God. We can imagine the gossip – the parents' confusion and shame – and Joseph's consternation. How could this have happened to Mary? Joseph was well within his rights to withdraw from the betrothal and could have publicly shamed Mary. But God chose well when he marked Joseph out as someone who would be a loving husband to Mary and nurturing father to Jesus. In a way, he took the shame and small-village gossip to himself and transformed it into a selfless act of love.

- How do you think Joseph and his and Mary's families were feeling at this point in Jesus' story?
- How does Joseph's confusion and dismay at the apparent behaviour of someone else echo things that have happened in your own life?

During a time of quiet today, play through Joseph's story. We do not know much about what his life was like before this but he was a carpenter – may have been married before – and was seen by Mary's parents as someone she could be happy with. Think about the wedding plans being put in place – and then someone, probably Mary's father, breaking the news and the painful conversations that would have followed... even saying that the pregnancy was through the Holy Spirit would not have made sense. Then this dream – and knowing what the neighbours would say – and choosing to honour the betrothal – and all that was to come as a consequence of that...

## Friday 23 December

Scripture: Malachi 3: 1-4, 23-24; Psalm 24; Luke 1: 57-66

*Fear came over all Zechariah and Elizabeth's 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.*

Earlier in the week, we referred to the likelihood that Zechariah and Elizabeth's inability to have children was a cause for gossip in the area. Today's gospel suggests that there was some truth in this but now the subject has changed. Rather than stirring scandal, the people have become nervous. After all these years of pointing fingers at Zechariah and Elizabeth, they realise that God has given them a special child. They see that simply writing John's name has cured Zechariah of dumbness. Small wonder that they begin to wonder what this child will become.

- What do you think the conversations about Zechariah, Elizabeth and John would have been like?
- Do you think people felt guilty – or ashamed – or simply enjoyed having a new topic to chat about?

Gossip and concern are often closer than we think they are – it is what we do with them. Gossip tends to stop at the enjoying news at someone else's expense. Concern is talking about someone and, where appropriate, doing something to help. Reflect on which fits you best – and bring your thoughts to the Lord for his opinion!



## Thursday 22 December

Scripture: 1 Samuel 1: 24-28; 1 Samuel 2: 1, 4-8; Luke 1: 46-56

*Mary said,  
'From now on all generations will call me blessed;  
for the Mighty One has done great things for me,  
and holy is his name.*

It is very unlikely that all generations will call *us* blessed but it would be good to think that people who know us might remember us as people who have been blessed by God. The “great things” that God does for us will not be in the same league as calling us to give birth to the Son of God – but God does do great things in everyone’s life – even if we are not always very good at seeing them. When we take time to savour them – and recognise the gift, we are brought to gratitude and a sense of the abundant and generous holiness of our God.

- What are the great things that God has done for you during your life?
- How do you feel as you remember them?

Spend some time today looking at some of the things God has done for you – if not over your lifetime, over the past year. As you remember them, you might like to make a note of them for times when you feel downcast – a reminder that God has been and always will be at work in your life. Notice how you feel as things come to your mind and heart. At the end make up your own simple Magnificat – it need not be in Mary’s league but if it comes from the heart it will give praise and thanks to God.



## Monday 19 December

Scripture: Judges 13: 2-7, 24-25; Psalm 70; Luke 1: 5-25

*In the days of King Herod of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly order of Abijah. His wife was a descendant of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. Both of them were righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord. But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were getting on in years.*

In today’s gospel, we have an exemplary couple with great credentials according to the traditions of their day. Zechariah is a priest – and so a descendant of Moses’ brother, Aaron. Unlike the priests Jesus was to encounter later in his life, Zechariah does not seem to have been part of an elite group but someone who was content to worship God and study the scriptures in his home village. Elizabeth is also a descendant of Aaron and, we are told, both lived good and holy lives. Their great sorrow is that they have no children – a state which was actually associated with sin and it is likely that there would have been speculation about what that sin might have been among some of the neighbours. In fact, Zechariah – like Joseph yesterday – would have been within his rights to divorce Elizabeth on the grounds of her barrenness. The fact that they had lived together so long and clearly had great love and respect for each other says much about their quality as people. And their faith in God is vindicated long after they would have given up hope – a child is conceived – another descendant of Aaron to bless the world.

- How do you think Zechariah and Elizabeth dealt with the gossip and speculation around them?
- What sustained their relationship in the face of their problems and difficulties?

Pray today for married people – especially those struggling against great difficulties.

## Tuesday 20 December

Scripture: Isaiah 7: 10-14; Psalm 23; Luke 1: 26-38

*Gabriel said to Mary, '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.'*

We do not know what Mary was doing when Gabriel came to meet her. Some paintings have her reading – reflecting a sense that she was probably reading the scriptures and praying with them. This seems possible – perhaps she was reading about the coming of the Messiah and this prepared her spiritually for the coming of an angel. Also likely though is that, as a young woman ready for marriage, she would have been busy about the household responsibilities – grinding corn, spinning, weaving, cooking, minding children – and more. Perhaps her mind was pondering things she had heard or read and, in the midst of her busy-ness, the angel came to her and spoke words of great promise.

- What do you imagine Mary to be doing just before Gabriel appears to her?
- What do you think she made of Gabriel's words?

The conversation between Mary and Gabriel is not the sort of thing you expect while doing the washing – but it may have been the setting for it – as could any of Mary's chores especially as we know she loved to ponder God's word. As you are going about your daily tasks today, try to let your mind and heart ponder some words of scripture or incident in the bible or life of favourite saint. It is unlikely that you will be visited by Gabriel but it is possible that you will have a new insight from your reflections.



## Wednesday 21 December (St Peter Canistus)

Scripture: Song of Songs 2: 8-14 or Zephaniah 3: 14-18, Psalm 32, Luke 1: 39-45

*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?'*

As we heard earlier in the week, Elizabeth was descended from one of the greatest people in the history of the Jewish people – Aaron. Although as a woman she could not fulfil the traditional priestly ministry of the Aaronic house, she has no qualms about proclaiming what God is doing for his people. She is aware of the greatness of the events of which she is a part but, despite her noble ancestry, is also humble enough to ask why she should be considered worthy to welcome Mary. And not only Mary but her Lord, the Messiah.

- When have you been part of something wonderful and asked yourself what you could ever have done to deserve this?
- Who do you know who has a high status – either through birth or hard work – and retains a true sense of humility?

As we approach Christmas Day, it might be good to reflect today on the enormity of what we are celebrating. Here we are in our very ordinary parishes celebrating the coming of God into the world – and, not only that, Christ himself will be present among us in his Word and in the Eucharist. Spend some time pondering this great mystery of which you are a part this weekend.

