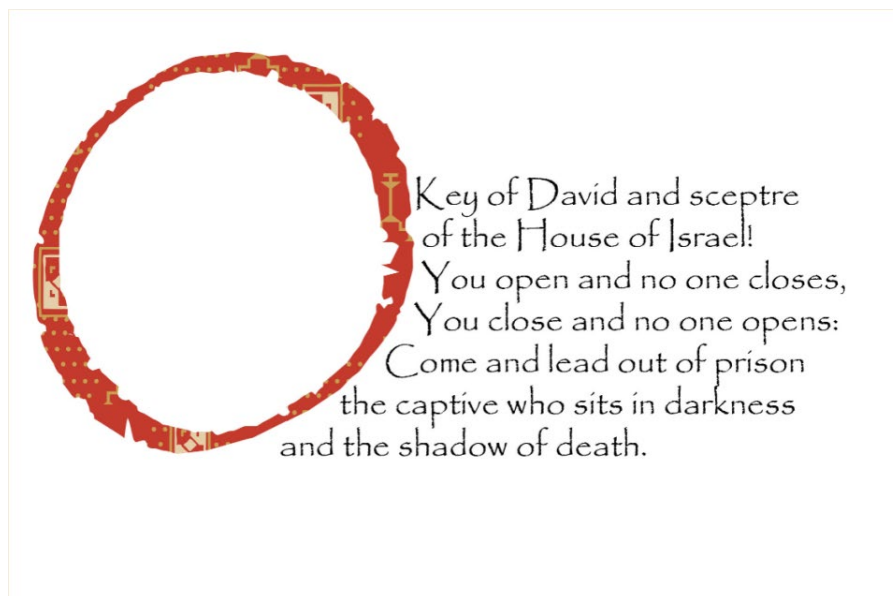


A Camino through Advent 2020



December 20, 2020—Fourth Sunday of Advent



On this final Sunday of our Camino through Advent, we are presented once again with the Annunciation account from Luke that we read as our Gospel back on the Feast the Immaculate Conception (December 8). Somehow, however, the reading today is much more immediate as we are just days away from Christmas. As our backdrop we are aware of Mary's fear and wonder, but we recognise her deep trust and faith. Her simple life in the outback of Galilee had: **"won God's favour"** (Lk 1:30); it is in those ordinary and simple things that we can find salvation.

There is a lovely story told of the teenage saint Dominic Savio: he took to Don Bosco's exhortation that his pupils could become saints; Dominic started to follow the example of the aesthetic saints he had read about. He filled his bed with stones so that he could not sleep properly and took to fasting for long periods; with lack of food and sleep, his health deteriorated badly, and Don Bosco was deeply concerned. When Dominic told his mentor what he was doing to achieve sanctity, Bosco reminded him that we become saints not by doing the extraordinary but by doing the ordinary extraordinarily well.

Just a few weeks ago another fifteen-year-old, Carlo Acutis, was beatified; he can rightly be called the saint of Facebook and Twitter; he is a modern saint who, while dressed in jeans and a tracksuit top, pointed to the need for the Eucharist in our lives. A modern saint who was at home with the internet and recognised its power in our lives; his mother Antonia spoke to reporters prior to the ceremony, "I must say that the internet is incredible. It's a gift. Of course, the internet has a dark side when misused for pornography, bullying and selling drugs, but Carlo showed the good side of internet. And we know that the light is stronger than the darkness." Obviously, she is biased, but she sees her eldest child, a victim of leukaemia, as a prophet for our times: "Because, of course, a saint is somebody who goes a little bit against the mainstream, the mentality of most people." Don Bosco, Dominic Savio and Carlo could be seen as 'rebels' as they offer values that sometimes we would like to hide. He spoke of the cult of the superstar that is all too obvious in our society today, as a quick look into any tabloid newspaper will show; he would comment:

You see queues in front of a football match or an actor or rock singer, but you don't see a queue for the tabernacle where there is the real presence of God, God that lives among us.



Blessed Carlo Acutis 1991–2006

Personally, I am drawn to Carlo's wisdom when he said: **"We are all born original, but many die as photocopies."** Today we see God blessing the original gift to the world that is Mary; Blessed Carlo wants each of us to make our own contribution to the life of the world, and it is a contribution that only YOU can make. While Carlo was strongly attached to the Eucharist, his prayer life, and working in his local soup kitchen, he enjoyed physical activity, playing with his many friends and living the life of a normal teenager—others sought him out when they had problems; he was a real friend to those in need. Carlo's friendly face was a common sight in his neighbourhood. He befriended everybody, including the gatekeepers, janitors and other domestic workers employed around his area. These workers were often non-Europeans with Muslim and Hindu backgrounds. Carlo told everybody about his love for Christ, and people couldn't help but listen and share in his joy. Another recent saint, Cardinal Newman, powerfully reminds us of our uniqueness; I pray that today you do not follow the crowd, but that you are prepared to make a difference:

God has created me to do him some definite service; He has committed some work to me which he has not committed to another. I have my mission; I never may know it in this life, but I shall be told it in the next. I have a part in a great work; I am a link in a chain, a bond of connection between persons. He has not created me for naught. I shall do good, I shall do His work; I shall be an angel of peace, a preacher of truth in my own place, while not intending it, if I do but keep His commandments and serve Him in my calling.

(St John Henry Newman)

Mary had found that level of sanctity and was chosen to be the 'SHEKINAH' or place of encounter with God. God's *Shekinah* is assuming flesh and blood in the womb of history, within the womb of a Davidic descendent, Mary, who dares to say: **"I am the handmaid of God, be it done to me according to your word"** (Lk 1:38). It is Mary's faith that makes the incarnation possible; it is our faith that makes the incarnation possible in our own world. It brings new meaning to our families, to grow with us, to be with us. And it is through the goodness of our own faith, one with him, that the love of God is to be radiated out into the whole world. Today we can follow the example of Mary and see great things happen with just a little love, mixed with a little faith; Christmas is not something that happened to other people many, many centuries ago. Christmas can happen every day when we bring our faith together and say to God: **"Take my life. Be it done to you and be it done to me according to Your word."**

TODAY: Follow the example of Blessed Carlo and use the internet to bring goodness—even a positive tweet could help someone.

We can pray as we light the fourth candle:

Lord, we thank you for the gift of Mary in the life of our Church—may we follow her example of faith, hope and love. Like her may we see God's hand in all we do and say today.

We thank you for the gifts of Dominic Savio and Carlo Acutis; they are role model for our young as they remind us that we can all be happy and have good times following the Gospel.

As adults, may we always give good example and be open to learning from our young people: they can teach us so much if our ears and hearts are open to them.

As we light this fourth candle and complete a circle of light, may we share that light with those we meet this week; may that light guide us through the hectic few days ahead and may we enjoy the eternal light of Jesus on Christmas Day itself. AMEN

December 21, 2020—Monday of the Fourth Week



O dawn of the east, brightness of light eternal, and sun of justice: come, and enlighten those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death.

One of the things I love about Mary of Nazareth is her decisive action; in reality she does not appear much in the Gospels, but she is always seen as helping and supportive from Bethlehem to Cana to Calvary to the early Christian lockdown in the Upper Room. On hearing that she is to be the mother of God she does not sit back and bask in her chosen status; nor does she figuratively flick through the pages of an early 'Mothercare' catalogue to pick items for the nursery. Luke presents her going on a difficult journey south to: ***"the hill country of Judea"*** (Lk 1:39) so that she could be with Elizabeth, the older woman, who was having a child for the first time. Mary was her help and support—she was the help to the couple at Cana; she supported Jesus to the very end on Calvary; and she was that needed point of care to the early disciples after Resurrection when they feared for their lives. Just to see Mary's smiling face coming around the corner must have brought great comfort; we need those friends and family members who cause the same reaction in our lives too. Be thankful today for those who offer that support; for those who cause you to smile and feel good just thinking about them—they are true friends.



In the courtyard of the Church of the Visitation in the village Ein Karem outside Jerusalem is the statue of the 'Visitation' depicting the momentous meeting of the two pregnant women. Elizabeth is filled with that indescribable joy when she meets Mary and exclaims in the style of Judith and Jael: ***"Of all women you are the most blessed and blessed is the fruit of your womb"*** (Lk 1:42). Elizabeth gives praise to God who makes a promise that is kept: both women will bring children into the world—children that will transform the world. Elizabeth proclaims that they are truly BLESSED, and I am reminded on that incident in the Gospel who sees that the womb he came from is blessed, the breasts that suckled him are blessed. Jesus' reply is simple and to the point: ***"More blessed still are those who HEAR the word of God and KEEP it"*** (Lk 11:28). Mary and Elizabeth are those faithful disciples who hear and keep God's word; not only do they 'talk the talk', which is relatively easy to do, they 'walk the walk'—much harder to achieve but the sign of a true disciple. Like Mary, you will be carrying Jesus with you today; how you respond to situations and people will define your very being today. Be kind, listen and give praise and thanks who help you along the Camino today: may your day move from grey to gold.

TODAY: Smile more—share a joke and laugh heartily (just like a six-year-old).

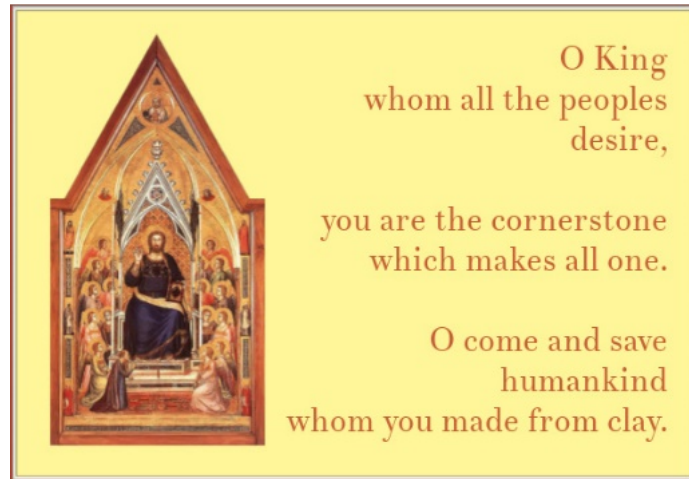
We can pray:

**May you find a gift this morning
Laid out for you in the sky.
A beautiful reminder
That sets your hope in flight.**

**May you notice birds above you
That soar and ride the winds.**

And know that as you lift your prayer
God lifts your heart and sings.
May you hear the sweet birds chirping
May you smell the fresh cool air
And know that God's love is all around
Holding you so dear.

December 22, 2020—Tuesday of the Fourth Week



Christ Enthroned, Giotto di Bondo. Public Domain via Wikimedia Commons

In the Gospel today, we have Mary's response to Elizabeth's greeting—a response that we have come to love in the Magnificat prayer. It is a prayer rooted in the Hebrew hymn of praise tradition and it's something we could perhaps use as a guide for our own prayer today.

Mary gives a reason for her praise: ***"because he has looked upon his lowly handmaid"*** (Lk 1:48); she joins with women such as Hannah and Leah in offering fulsome praise of God: ***"What happiness! Women will call me happy!"*** (Gen 30:13). In full charismatic flow, Mary proclaims God to be:

- **The mighty one**—God saves the people; for the Hebrew people this is centred on Exodus, their freedom from slavery and commemorated annually at Passover.
- **The holy one**—Mary carries the holy one who will show the world what it means to be truly HOLY. It does not involve 'chewing down the altar rails' as the wise women of St James Parish in Bootle would often remind me!
- **The merciful one**—time and time again, God has offered his people yet another chance. God continues that quality in the ministry of both John and Jesus; we need to continue that quality in our forgiving and caring relationships.

As the prayer progresses, we see Mary echo Jesus' concern for those on the margins; the reign of God is for all, not just the lucky few. Please never limit the grace of God to a special group that happen to go to your church or who think just like you or pray just like you. We belong to a very broad Church as Mary reminds us: ***"He has routed the proud of heart, he has pulled down princes from their thrones and exalted the lowly. The hungry he has fed with good things, the rich sent empty away"*** (Lk 1:52–53). Gospel values are not always what society wants, and this time of pandemic and enforced lockdown has forced many to look at our lives and see where priorities should lie. As the prayer ends, Mary reminds us of the covenant bond that God has with all of us: ***"Mindful of his mercy—according to the promise he made to our ancestors—of his mercy to Abraham and his descendants for ever"*** (Lk 1:54–55). Unlike many of us, God makes a promise that will never be abandoned or conveniently forgotten; Mary is all too aware of the personal promise that God made to her at the Annunciation. In staying with Elizabeth for ***"about three months"*** (Lk 1:56), Mary honours that promise in her care for Elizabeth: we cannot say we are close to God and ignore our neighbour in need. The letter of John puts it very well: ***"If we say we love God, but hate others, we are liars. For we cannot love God, whom we have not seen, if we do not love others, whom we have seen"*** (1 Jn 4:12).

TODAY: Offer help without having to be asked.

We can pray:

Today we pray with Mary and offer our full praise and thanks to God; concentrate on the good that you have received and offer those bad memories and experiences to a God who is walking with you today.

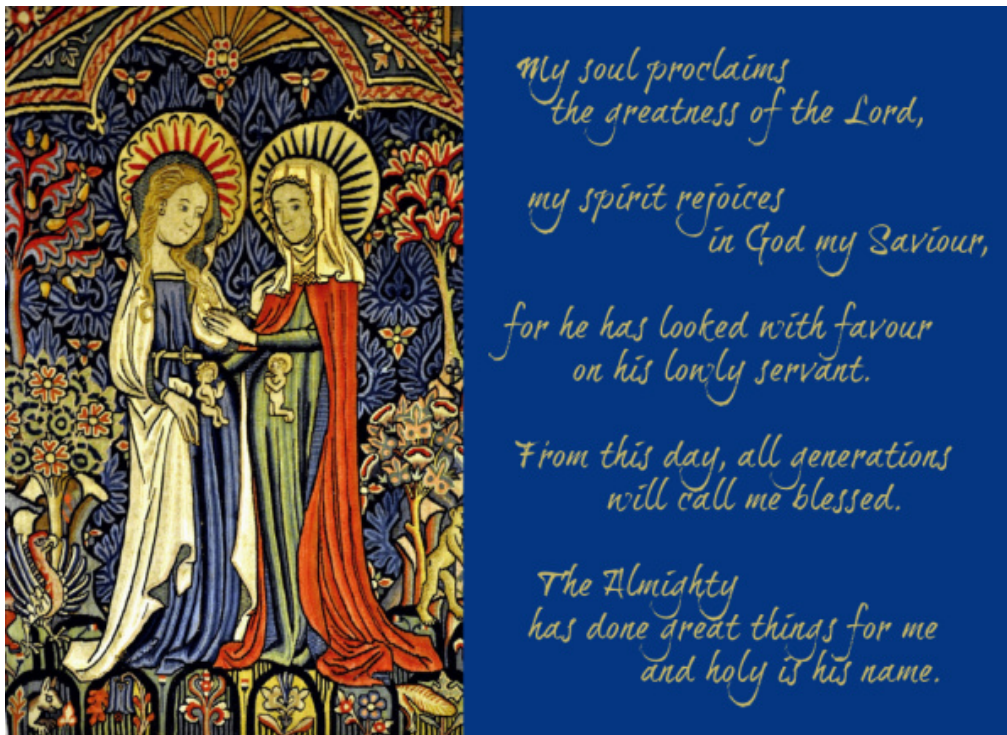


Image: Detail from Altar Tapestry, Strasbourg c1410 Public Domain Via Wikimedia Commons

December 23, 2020—Wednesday of the Fourth Week



By Sister M Nerina de Simone, via Qumran2.net

O EMMANUEL, God with us, our King and Lawgiver, the expected of the nations and their Saviour: come to save us, O Lord our God

Today the focus of our Gospel is once again John the Baptist: friends and family gather with Elizabeth to ***“share her joy”*** (Lk 1:58) in the birth of this unexpected son. At his naming ceremony they assume that he will be named after his father, Zechariah, who made it quite explicit as he wrote: ***“His name is John”*** (Lk 1:63), which is very fitting as the name means ‘God’s gracious gift’. In that simple act of submission to the Will of God, the pride and arrogance of Zechariah is freed, and he is able to talk again. In regaining the gift of speech: ***“He spoke and praised God. All their neighbours were filled with awe and the whole affair was talked about throughout the hill country of Judea”*** (Lk 1:64–65).

When we NAME somebody the relationship becomes very special: I will always remember the time when a friend called me ‘Gerry’ for the first time instead of using my title, ‘Father’; it may seem a little thing, but it was so special and made me realise that we were now friends and could dispense with anything that could get in the way of that true friendship. In our Gospel today, Zechariah realises his lack of faith and trust in God, while Elizabeth simply lives it; their tiny infant will grow up to challenge and to prepare the world for the Emmanuel, to help us to realise that God is indeed with us. As you walk this Advent Camino today, with Christmas Day just around the corner, I pray that your faith and trust be like that of Elizabeth: you CAN do great things today because the ***“hand of God”*** (Lk 1:66) is with you too.

TODAY: Bring your family and friends before God and NAME each one of them—perhaps you can light a candle for them.

We can pray:

Lord, thank you for the goodness in my life and for giving me my name. When I wake each morning, I praise Your name! You have given me life that is filled with beauty, and the breath in my lungs is a gift from You. I pray that You will fill my day with love and sustenance. And may I remember at the end of each of my days, to thank you for all that has been placed in my life. AMEN

December 24, 2020—Christmas Eve



The Simplicity of God, Julian Garcia Mejia, via Qumran2.net

Our Camino is nearly at an end—there is something so special about Christmas Eve: the shops close early and if you have not got that ‘must have gift’, then you will have to wait until the post-Christmas sales and save yourself a fortune. I remember with great affection the traditions of other families that I have been privileged to share: last Christmas Eve I joined a family from eastern Europe as we shared the traditional carp; due to commitments in the parish, I could not stay to enjoy the whole twelve courses (in honour of the twelve apostles of Jesus), but I did feel well and truly blessed. The Gospel of our day Mass echoes that sensation as Zechariah, now free and a father for the first time, can pray his own prayer of blessing, what we now know as the ‘Benedictus’. As the Hebrew people could give thanks to a saving God after the Exodus event, so praise now fills the mouth of the once silent Zechariah: ***“Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel for he has visited his people, he has come to their rescue”*** (Lk 1:68). In a few short hours we will celebrate that saving God who comes to visit us in the form of a child, innocent and full of wonder. We are saved by a God who first comes to us as a child! In his adult ministry Jesus saw the important of children, as he welcomed and encouraged them. We are called, as a Church, to ensure that our children are always safe and well; like Jesus we are invited to learn from them. In the prayer, the father blesses his child, John, who will grow up to be the Baptist: ***“to go before the Lord, to prepare a way for him, to give his people knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sin”*** (Lk 1:76–77). As the night draws in tonight, we are buoyed up by the lights of our Christmas trees and the simple carols that we sing together that give us hope. I hope that this Advent Camino has brought you light in these dark pandemic times. I urge to go to

Midnight Mass if you can, but remember it will be on your television screens later this evening—even the BBC and ITV acknowledge the sacred in these secular times.

On this most sacred of nights, we remember that the risen Lord will: ***“visit us to give light to those who live in darkness and in the shadow of death and to guide our feet into the way of peace”*** (Lk 1:79). Please send in any prayer requests that will be placed in the crib here tonight; I hope that Christmas 2020 will be remembered for the right reasons. I hope that this holiday season will give you respite from being weighed down by the fear of COVID-19 and the darkness it has brought us. I hope that you have a wonderful family Christmas, surrounded by those you love and who love you. Keep safe and well; may you have a very happy and blessed Christmas.

While our Advent Camino might end tonight, I pray that we might be able to walk together again during Lent. As the great parable of Final Judgement tells us, we do not go to the Lord on our own—our actions and attitude towards others go with us. Jesus reminds us: ***as long as you did it for the least of these my sisters or brothers, you did it for me*** (Matt 25:40).

TODAY: See if anyone needs help in the kitchen; if you are in the kitchen then don't be afraid to ask for help! Enjoy your feast.

We pray as you light the Christmas Candle

May the Lord bless you and keep you

The Blessing in Hebrew:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kzqrWae5IK4>

**Let us be still in the darkness of our sacred space,
And listen to the quiet around us.
For even in the quiet, there is the gentle being with others.
Let us feel the warmth of our community,
Knowing we are not alone.
For in the quiet shadow is the glow of life within all.**

**Let us know in the darkness the gift each candle bears,
A small flame, a diminutive light—
Yet the wondrous gift to kindle another's glow.
Let us be in awe at this moment as we each take up the flame
And the light envelopes this room,
As hope for peace and goodwill fill this night.
So may it be.
(by Lisa Rubin)**

December 25, 2020—Christmas Day

As you open your gifts and cards today, remember just how much you are loved and respected; love your family and friends who are with you, think of those loved ones unable to share this day. Our virtual Camino has joined us together over these past four weeks and we are closer than ever today. May you have a truly blessed and wonderful Christmas.



Image by Don Sebastiano Iervolino, via Qumran2.net

TODAY: Be with your loved ones.

We pray:

Fill our world with your peace. AMEN

For children



Jean-François Kieffer via Qumran2.net



Las Melli via Qumran2.net