

A Camino through Advent 2020



December 13, 2020— Third Sunday of Advent

Well we are over halfway through our Camino, and the danger is that we can get so caught up with December 25 that we could miss out on the beauty that these next couple of weeks will bring us. Yes, there is shopping to be done, cards to be sent and gifts to be wrapped, but our Advent Camino is that chance to give something back to the Lord and to each other. Remember to send in prayer requests and they will be included in our daily Mass here in Bolton. If you have a spare moment, please remember the Salesian family in your own prayers and ask that others may follow in the footsteps of Don Bosco and Mother Mazzarello—we certainly need that generosity.

In the Gospel today, once again John the Baptist is front and centre but, as always, he is pointing beyond himself to the person of Jesus: ***“He came as a witness, as a witness to speak for the light...he was not the light, only a witness to speak for the light”*** (Jn 1:7–8). In John’s great ‘Prologue’ we see a wonderful piece of poetry that echoes the beauty of Genesis, the first book of the Bible. John presents the Messiah as the LIGHT: ***“a light that shines in the dark, a light that darkness could not overpower”*** (Jn 1:5). In these dark, cold nights, the Christmas tree lights are a welcome distraction and should point to a deeper reality of faith: the light of Christ will make a difference, the light of Christ will see us through these times of hardship. A global pandemic has brought a universal darkness as we have experienced, lockdown, shielding, unemployment, failure, pain and death. However, the experience of these past few months has also highlighted the light of the NHS, the care and consideration of family and friends and the lengths that some people have gone to keep in touch. Social distancing does not mean we have to be distant; we need not ignore each other or use it as an excuse to erase people from our lives.

Today the priests come to John to demand: ***“Who are you?”*** (Jn 1:19). John is open and tells them plainly that he is not the Christ: ***“the Word made flesh”*** (Jn 1:14). In a conversation like the one Jesus had with his disciples when he asked the question: ***“Who do people say the***

Son of Man is?" (Matt 16:13), the Jerusalem group need to know who John is. John again sees himself as the: ***"voice that cries in the wilderness: Make a straight path for the Lord"*** (Jn 1:23); we all those need people in our lives who can cut through the drama and the problems and give us clear and straight guidance. The faith leader wants to create problems where there are none: John is using water merely as a symbol of repentance, a ritual cleansing. The Messiah, the one John is preparing the way for, has the power and strength of the Holy Spirit to move us all forward.

As we reflect today, we can think of those we have met who pointed us towards Jesus; I think of my parents and family, I give thanks for those fellow Salesians who have given me an unselfish example of real care for the young. I praise God for the countless young people I've met over the years who have helped me to come closer to God. I am grateful to those families who have accepted me as another hungry guest at their home table; I appreciate those friends who have become part of our extended Salesian family and continue that inspirational mission and outreach to the young.

God will come to you in the most unexpected ways this week; unexpected people, young or old, will help you to discover God's Will for you. As a Salesian of Don Bosco, I thank those young people who pointed the way—and still do. Be alert this week to see, hear and fully experience the wonder that God is calling you to share.

TODAY: Listen to the voice of the children and young people in your life— they have a wisdom beyond their years.

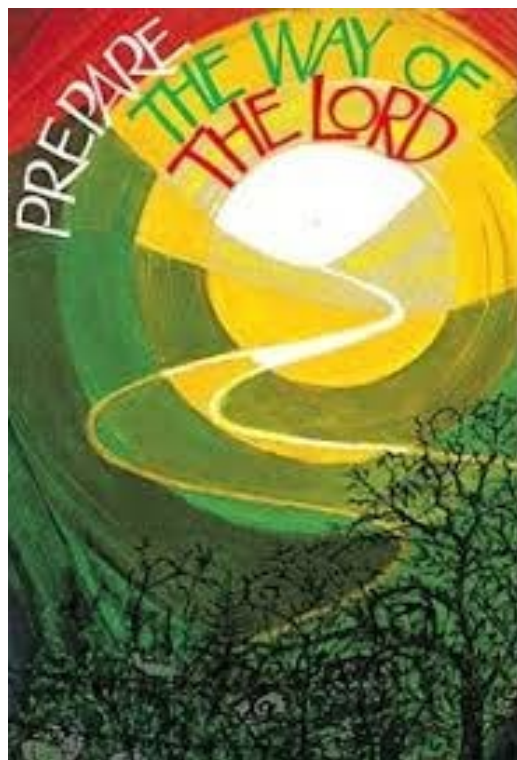


Image: The Benedictine Sisters of Turvey Abbey

This may help you to reflect as you 'Prepare a Way for the Lord': From Godspell, 1973

<https://youtu.be/c1SiaCV26aQ>

We can pray, as we light the third candle:

**Thanks be to you, my lord, Jesus Christ,
For all the benefits that you have given me;
For all the pains and insults you have borne for me.
O, most merciful redeemer, friend and brother,
May I know you more clearly;
Love you more dearly;
And follow you more nearly day by day.
(St Richard of Chichester)**

December 14, 2020—The Feast of St John of the Cross

Today the Church gives us a sixteenth-century Spanish Carmelite friar to reflect on; in this time of Advent we are given another 'prophet' to think about. St Teresa of Ávila persuaded him to work with her on the REFORM of the Carmelites: together they wanted to return to a stricter way of life, envisaged by their founders, with a return to regulated prayer times, fasting and style of the religious habit. As with all change, some can adapt and cope, while others fight it—the Carmelites had their own 'civil war' with John being eventually imprisoned by his fellow friars. During this time of 'lockdown', he composed some of his most amazing works, as he experienced 'The Dark Night of The Soul'. For John, this was the journey of the soul from its bodily home to union with God. It happens during the 'dark', which represents the hardships and difficulties that we all must face so that we can reach the light of the union with the Creator. Without a doubt these past few months have been a 'dark night' for many of us as we were without the support and the human touch of loved ones who could not be included in our 'social bubble' due to distance or the need to shield. The pandemic has made us scared and suspicious: can we meet up? Who do I include in my group? Should we go out? As that wartime poster famously reminded us: 'Is your journey REALLY necessary?'

We will all have to face problems, crises and hurt during life—sometimes, just like John, the problems come from those we live with, those we are close to and those who know us best. I feel that it was this betrayal that hurt John the most: to be let down by family and friends is so difficult to come to terms with. In this Camino, we are striving to achieve a peace and unity that Christ offers us, but please be conscious of those for whom Christmas will only drag up painful memories. For some, Christmas Day is the loneliest day of the year. It can be so difficult to enter the festive mood when you are wounded and broken; as we experience the darkness, let us look to the light—a pot that is cracked can let the light in!

**In an obscure night
Fevered with love's anxiety
(O hapless, happy plight!)
I went, none seeing me
Forth from my house, where all things quiet be.
(‘Dark Night of the Soul’)**

In our Gospel today, Jesus is challenged by the ***“chief priests and elders of the people”*** (Matt 21:23) on his authority—John of the Cross tried to challenge his Carmelite Brothers too. The pain and disruption led to a division within the Carmelites and the forming of new communities. Jesus is both challenged and challenging as he tries to move people on. The leaders of the community should be encouraging and supportive; instead they are manipulative and insincere.

The challenge of the Gospel today is that we do not get caught into this trap of controlling others: we are given a freedom as daughters and sons of a loving God. No one has the right to take that joy from you even if they are a partner, a friend, or a boss! You have a dignity that is God's gift to you alone—cherish it and celebrate it. For those experiencing darkness today, please look to the Christmas lights, remember the good times and celebrate the gift you are.

TODAY: If you know of a family member or friend experiencing problems and going through a 'dark night' reach out to them in friendship and warmth.

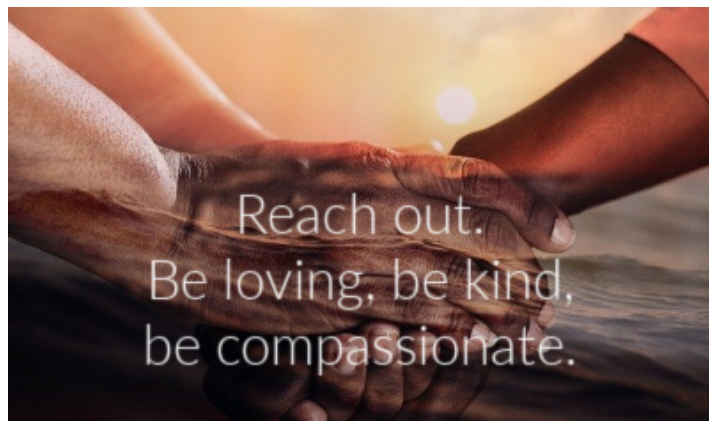


Photo by Anya on Pixabay

In these 'physically distanced' times, we do not need to be 'socially distanced' too! In your heart and mind, reach out to those hurting today and pray with them so that they might soon experience light

Watch 'Reach Out and Touch (Somebody's Hand)':

<https://youtu.be/clihblOPxrU>

We can pray:

Lord, in these days help me to reach out to those in need.

Help me to listen, help me to use the right words in speaking to them.

As we face the problems of Covid-19 together, may this time of Advent keep us open to your light, strength, hope and love.

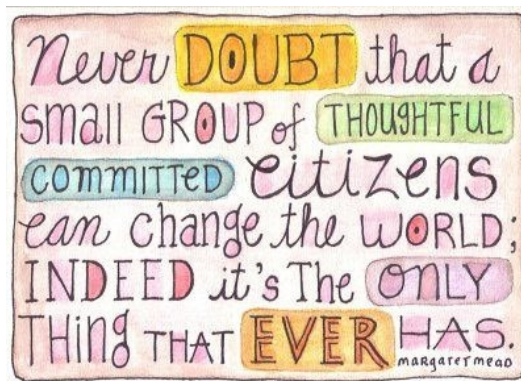
May we walk this Advent Camino together in your peace and understanding. AMEN

December 15, 2020—Tuesday of the Third Week

I do hope that some of you can remember the comedy show, the 'Vicar of Dibley' with the talented Dawn French playing the part of an-all-too-human village vicar with a fondness for fine malt and Curly Wurlies. What made the show such a success, in my opinion, was the amazing ensemble cast. Among such acting greats as Liz Smith, James Fleet and Emma Chambers, a firm favourite of mine was Trevor Peacock, who played the lovable Jim Trott who said 'YES' when he meant 'no' and 'NO' when he meant 'yes'—it led to some great scenes of comic misunderstanding. Today's Gospel presents the parable of 'YES & NO'; Jesus is still speaking to the elders, those who should know how to faithfully follow God, but they have given mixed messages—so much so that Jesus affirms: ***"I tell you solemnly, tax collectors and prostitutes are making their way into the kingdom of God before you"*** (Matt 21:31). Jesus implies that the leaders are the ones who have rejected their covenant relationship with God, while those on the fringes of society, the socially unacceptable, are the ones who respond positively to the call of John to repentance.

Today is a call not to be like Jim Trott, and to say exactly what we mean; today is a call to identify fully with the Gospel and to take it to heart. Today, we journey with those sinners to the embrace of a God of forgiveness, as John the Baptist preached. Please do not go through motions of faith today: say a firm and positive 'YES' to what is asked of you today; do not procrastinate, rather act with confidence and trust in God and in others.

TODAY: Respond positively to the cry for help from a family member or friend.



We can pray:

We but mirror the world. All the tendencies present in the outer world are to be found in the world of our body. If we could change ourselves, the tendencies in the world would also change. As a man changes his own nature, so does the attitude of the world change towards him. This is the divine mystery supreme. A wonderful thing it is and the source of our happiness. We need not wait to see what others do.

(Mahatma Gandhi)



We are now invited to enter into a very solemn part of our Camino through Advent; it is a time to get ready, with minds and hearts open to the impending message. However, if you are like me, these last few days leading up to December 25 are usually hectic: school carol services, parties to go to, shopping to get, cards to send and gifts to wrap and churches to get ready. In these strange times, perhaps there is not the same intensity or social opportunity, and we might be able to focus a little more closely on the meaning of Christmas. In a strange way, the pandemic may have given us the gift of 'time and reflection.' I urge you to use it wisely and well! I invite you to join us as we pray the Christmas Novena over these next nine days; the Novena is a traditional Catholic prayer. Those who practise it, recite a series of prayers for nine days with a purpose—or for a particular request—in the common thought of praising God.

Christmas Novena 2020: The Prayers

- **The first day** is dedicated to the invocation of Baby Jesus. The whole New Testament is based on the expectation of Christ that we continue to wait every year as if it were the first. The first prayer is: "Come, Baby Jesus".
- On **the second day**, the heart rejoices because God announces the future salvation to people. This announcement is a cause of great joy because it means that after death, reconciliation and communion with Jesus will be possible. The prayer of the second day is: "Jesus, hear us."
- On **the third day** of the Novena, we prepare the way for the Lord. The reference prayer is: "Send your Spirit, O Lord."
- **The fourth day** is dedicated to bearing witness to Christ. At the time, it was the mission of John the Baptist and he accomplished it in truth and in humility, exhorting to conversion and pointing to Jesus as the Saviour. Our prayers are accompanied by: "Listen to us, O Lord."

- **The fifth day** is dedicated to God's plan of salvation which meets the will and collaboration of Joseph and Mary. Our fifth day prayers are also guided by: "Listen to us, oh Lord."
- **The sixth day** is addressed to the handmaid of the Lord. After the announcement to Mary by the Archangel Gabriel, God begins to give life to the ancient promises about the coming of the Messiah. The prayer is: "We thank you, O Jesus."
- **On the seventh day** a sign of salvation appears, the miraculous birth of Emmanuel, the son of a virgin. In this event the evangelist reconnects the prophecy of the birth of Jesus: now God is really with us. By becoming a man, he came to live among us and continues to remain among us today, in the Church and in the Eucharist. The prayer is: "Honour and glory to You, Lord Jesus."
- **The eighth day** the emphasis is placed on the saving power of love. This love is good, tenderness, mercy, and presents itself despite the sins and weakness of men. The prayer is: "Show us, Lord, your Mercy."
- Finally, **the ninth day** is that of Christmas Eve and is dedicated to the journey into darkness until the reach of God. On the ninth day our prayers are guided by: "Listen, oh Lord."

December 16, 2020—Wednesday of the Third Week

Today's Gospel from Luke shows how our history of salvation is rooted in the ordinary and the human. John the Baptist, now a prisoner of Herod, sees himself preparing the road for the Messiah; but who is this Messiah, this Saviour? He sends two friends to Jesus to ask: **"are you the one who is to come our must we wait for someone else?"** (Lk 7:19). After our experience yesterday, you could expect a simple 'Yes' or 'No' from Jesus; instead, Jesus points to what is going on—he points to his actions. What do you expect a Messiah or Saviour to be? If it is leading an army of rebellion against the Roman, then the answer is a firm 'NO'! if you are looking for a wise detached academic at home with his library of books, then again, the answer is 'NO'! However, if you are looking for healing and restoration, then there is light at the end of your search, there is a 'YES' for: **"the blind see again, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised to life, the Good News is proclaimed to the poor"** (Lk 7:22). Jesus is living out the 'mission statement' that he proclaimed back home in Nazareth when used Isaiah (see Isa 61:1–2) to kickstart his ministry: **"He has sent me to bring Good News to the poor"** (Lk 4:18).

John's disciples can see with their own eyes what Jesus has done; they can experience that inclusive ministry of care for themselves. As we see in the great parable of Last Judgement (Matt 25:31–46), Christianity is a call to be active and involved and not sitting around on the sidelines. John is searching for a Messiah and Jesus wants to present a Messiah who is not distant and out of reach. We are called to experience God in the ordinary of life today; it is wonderful to get to a church or cathedral to pray; but today we can pray on the top deck of the bus, in the car, on the way to school and even in the chaos of the school run. God always walks with us; can you walk with God this day?

TODAY: What Good News can you share at home, work or school?



We can pray:

Lord, make me responsive to the needs of others.

May I be source of GOOD NEWS today and not fake news!

May we share your light as we become more involved in our world this day. AMEN

December 17 2020—Thursday of the Third Week



Without a doubt one of the most popular programmes on British TV is 'Who do You Think You are?' It is a very simple format where a celebrity delves into their family history and discovers all kinds of interesting, sometimes salacious, material on their ancestors. Through church and civic records, they can go right back and discover their origins and genealogy. My cousin, John Healy has done my own family a great service by recording our history and he discovered a great, great, great uncle recorded in the 1901 census as an 'imbecile'; he may have been a little different but we have no memories or other records of this hidden 'Uncle Patrick'—not even a record of his death.

Matthew today presents the genealogy of Jesus; conscious of his Jewish audience, he begins with Abraham and ends with Jesus, while a more inclusive Luke begins his family tree with Jesus and traces him back to: **"...son of Seth, son of Adam, son of God"** (Lk 3:38). Our Gospel today is taken from the very beginning of Matthew's account; he is proclaiming who Jesus is: **"Jesus Christ, Son of David, Son of Abraham"** (Matt 1:1). I must be honest; I was always praying that Deacon Michael or Deacon Fidelis would be able to proclaim the Gospel on December 17, as some of the Hebrew names are real tongue-twisters! However, more importantly, this opening chapter grounds Jesus in a human reality. Unusually, Matthew mentions five women in the lineage—some of whom were involved in irregular relationships, as were many of the men in the list. We are not called to judge, rather we embrace the good and bad that gave us the gift of Jesus, our Wisdom; Jesus was part of a family that embraced the very good and also those we would rather hide away and forget. When you read the stories of the first four women—and of the men on the list—we do not focus on their sin, but on the grace of God. The hero of this story is God. His grace shines through the blackest of human sin as he chooses flawed men and women and places them in Jesus' family tree.

TODAY: Tell a story from your childhood to a younger family member or friend.

We can pray:

Lord I thank you for my heritage and my family history. Bless all my family, living and dead; may I play my full part and never discredit my family name. Today, Lord, bless us especially with your wisdom. AMEN

December 18, 2020—Friday of the Third Week

The human reality and tragedy that was the conception of Jesus comes to light today, with a needed focus on Joseph, the husband of Mary. He discovers that Mary is pregnant, and Matthew makes it clear that Joseph has no knowledge of the event. Rather than forcing her to endure public humiliation and punishment, ***"Being a man of honour and wanting to spare her publicity, he decided to divorce her informally"*** (Matt 1:19).

As a Salesian, I love dreams, as they feature so much in the life of our founder, Don Bosco; thus Matthew's use of the 'dream' is very significant: the messenger of God, the angel, consoles him in his darkest hour: ***"Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife...she will give birth to a son and you must name him Jesus because he is the one to save his people from their sins"*** (Matt 1:20–21). This is how the naming and birth of Jesus is announced in Matthew—it is all quite abrupt, and we need to look to



Luke's Infancy Narrative for more detail. The prophecy of Isaiah is fulfilled, as ***"Emmanuel"*** (Isa 7:14) is born and Joseph is central to the account because: ***"he did what the angel of the Lord had told him"*** (Matt 1:24). Through the gift of Christmas, ***"God is with us"*** (Matt 1:23) in a real and tangible way; in the gift of Jesus Christ we can experience God on our own terms.

TODAY: Thank God for all those parents who accept the gift of children into their lives, even though circumstances may be difficult.

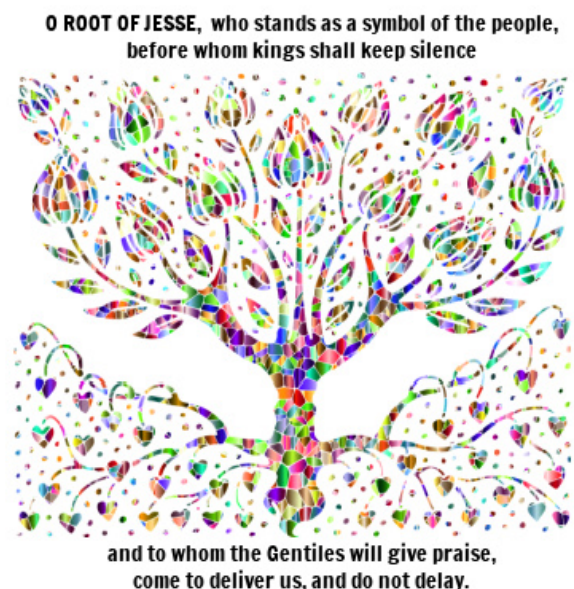
We can pray:

May we as parents be slow to anger, quick to hear, and eager to accept our children and grandchildren for the precious treasures they are. Right now, they need our assurance of love and comfort more than ever in these days of pandemic. Thank You for blessing us with the responsibility and privilege of parenting and grandparenting. At times we feel so weak, but You are strong. You will make a way through this. Our trust is in You always.

AMEN

December 19, 2020—Saturday of the Third Week

Here we are on the final Saturday before Christmas—traditionally a day that would see packed stores and people loaded up with bags of shopping. COVID-19 and its restrictions have made our retail experience very different in 2020. Many are content to order online and let Amazon or Tesco take the strain—they will even gift wrap your presents and deliver them for you! If you are like me, you will miss that human contact: fist bumping and 'elbow greetings' just do not do it! In our Gospel today, we have a very elaborate ANNUNCIATION of the birth of John the Baptist. Both his parents were old and had given up on the idea of having children; Zechariah belongs to the ***"Abijah section of the priesthood"*** (Lk 1:5), while Elizabeth is ***"a descendant of Aaron"*** (Lk 1:5). To be without a family was far from ideal: that genealogy, so central to Jesus, would be broken for this upright and holy couple. In scripture, God makes the impossible possible with the likes of Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Hannah—life can come from presumed barrenness. Gabriel, the messenger of God confronts Zechariah in the most holy place for any good Jew: ***"on the right of the altar of incense"*** (Lk 1:11); as the people



prayed in the great Temple, the birth of John is proclaimed: ***“He will be your joy and delight and many will rejoice at his birth”*** (Lk 1:14). Like Jesus, John’s life will be rooted deep in the teaching, commands and love of God as he: ***“will be filled with the Holy Spirit, and bring back many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God”*** (Lk 1:15–16). It is notable that Zechariah, despite his priestly status and faith, just cannot believe; he does not have the trust and faith of Elizabeth, Mary or Joseph and so cannot speak. It is a burden he must carry; as a priest of God as one of his tasks would be utter praise and exultation—he would be unable to do this until his child is named and he is able to proclaim to his loving wife, Elizabeth and their miracle baby John: ***“Blessed be the Lord the God of Israel for he has visited his people and come to their rescue”*** (Lk 1:68)

TODAY: Surprise someone with a call, text or email: make their day!

We can pray:

Guide us Lord along the path of your peace. Give us your vision. May we use today to build up and encourage—may words of criticism and hurt be forgotten. Guide us Lord this day and always. AMEN

For Children

Advent Word Search



ADVENT	TREE	FOODS	JOSEPH
CHRISTIAN	LIGHTS	CAROLS	SANTA
NATIVITY	GIFTS	WREATH	SNOWMAN
JESUS	PURPLE	STAR	SHOPPING
CHRISTMAS	EMMANUEL	MARY	CARDS

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