

SUNDAY PLUS

Love each other

Encouraging change

By Fr Denis McBride
C.Ss.R.

All the readings today share a marvellous insight: people begin to change when they are encouraged to see the best in themselves, not when they are asked to dwell with the worst in themselves. Simply to tell people what is wrong with them and leave it at that can be to leave them a wreck. It's like leaving the scene of an accident. And people rarely change when they are left to themselves, enclosed in their own weakness, staring at their own mistakes. That's a lonely project precisely because there is no one

to care whether change takes place or not.


In all this we need each other's help and encouragement. To change we need others prodding us on: "Go on! You can do it!" We need to call out the best in each other like Paul does with his converts, and rejoice with people in the changes they have made for the better. After all, Paul himself had to make big changes in his life, and it was the Philippians who gave him encouragement in his big change by accepting him as an apostle of the Lord.

If our community is to be constantly converted to the Lord, we all must breathe in encouragement and breathe it out. Perhaps this



Advent we could exercise that encouragement in a simple, practical way. That will be a change for the better. In the words of Cardinal Newman: "To be human is to change. To be perfect is to have changed often."

Fr Denis McBride's many books, CDs and DVDs are available from Redemptorist Publications, www.rpbooks.co.uk.

Dearest Jesus, show me how I might change for the better so that everything I say, think and do might reflect your love.  Amen.

Christ be with me

Christ be with me, Christ before me, Christ behind me,
Christ in me, Christ beneath me, Christ above me,
Christ on my right, Christ on my left,
Christ when I lie down, Christ when I sit down,
Christ in the heart of everyone who thinks of me,
Christ in the mouth of everyone who speaks of me,
Christ in the eye that sees me,
Christ in the ear that hears me.

St Patrick

"The Lord knocks on our door, he knocks on our heart to enter into friendship with us, in communion, to give us salvation... The uncontaminated beauty of our Mother is incomparable, but at the same time it attracts us. Let us entrust ourselves to her and say 'no' to sin and 'yes' to grace once and for all."

Pope Francis

Feast of the week
Wednesday 8 December

The Immaculate Conception of Our Lady

The beautiful lady revealed her identity in the words, "I am the Immaculate Conception." It was 25 March 1858 and the sixteenth time that Bernadette Soubirous had visited Massabielle on the outskirts of Lourdes. She didn't know that, on 8 December 1854, Pope Pius IX's declaration of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception, had stated that, as the Mother of God-to-be, Mary was conceived free from the effects of original sin.

Bernadette described the first apparition on 11 February, saying, "I came back towards the grotto and started taking off my stockings. I had hardly taken off the first stocking when I heard a sound like a gust of

wind... As I raised my head to look at the grotto, I saw a lady dressed in white, wearing a white dress, a blue girdle and a yellow rose on each foot, the same colour as the chain of her rosary; the beads of the rosary were white... From the niche, or rather the dark alcove behind it, came a dazzling light..."

On 25 February the lady told Bernadette "to drink of the water of the spring, to wash in it and to eat the herb that grew there," as an act of penance. Since the next day and continuing until today, clear water has flowed beside the grotto.

On 2 March, at the thirteenth apparition, the lady said that "a chapel should be built, and a procession formed".

Of her last visit to the Grotto on 16 July, Bernadette declared, "I have never seen her so beautiful before." *The Sanctuary of Our Lady of Lourdes is now one of the world's most important Catholic pilgrimage sites.*

Today:
Baruch 5:1-9
Philippians 1:4-6, 8-11
Luke 3:1-6

Monday:
Isaiah 35:1-10
Luke 5:17-26

Tuesday:
Isaiah 40:1-11
Matthew 18:12-14

Wednesday:
Genesis 3:9-15, 20
Ephesians 1:3-6, 11-12
Luke 1:26-38

Thursday:
Isaiah 41:13-20
Matthew 11:11-15

Friday:
Isaiah 48:17-19
Matthew 11:16-19

Saturday:
Ecclesiasticus 48:1-4, 9-11
Matthew 17:10-13

Next Sunday:
Zephaniah 3:14-18
Philippians 4:4-7
Luke 3:10-18

SUNDAY PLUS

The Lord is very near

A beautiful dance

By Fr Peter Morris C.Ss.R.

I'll never forget that long weekend I spent celebrating our friend's Stag Party. Thankfully, it did not entail the kinds of seedy goings-on that we can associate with the phenomenon! Highlights of the event included spending an evening or so gathered around a firepit outside, telling stories and sharing deeply about life. Our time was interspersed with silences as we contentedly gazed into the flames dancing before us. We were allowing ourselves to get lost in its utter beauty. It reflected the beauty of the genuine bonding that was happening between us.

In the Gospel today, St John the Baptist proclaims to the people that the one who

will follow him will baptise with the Holy Spirit and with fire. Immediately he associates this fire with the process of burning up the chaff left behind after separating it from the more useful wheat.

Rather than the fearful prospect of us being picked out as chaff, perhaps a more helpful thought would be to consider how God purifies us. Our Lord can remove from us all that is useless in the Christian life, leaving behind something that will sustain life and bring about greater yields to come. This process is beautiful, like fire can be if we spend time with it. Just like fire, our life can become a beguiling dance with its own rhythm but with some surprising flashes of joyful exuberance in between.

Fr Peter Morris' book, Christian Playfulness, is available from Redemptorist Publications, www.rpbooks.co.uk.




Simbang Gabi

Just in case anybody thinks of sleeping beyond the time of Mass, there will be church bells, marching bands and fireworks at 4am, with special celebratory food afterwards. For more than 350 years, from Thursday 16 December, the Philippines and, where possible, Filipino communities throughout the world, meet for a novena of Masses, known as "Simbang Gabi", as their preparation for Christmas.

The early timing is based on the ancient tradition that Jesus was born at midnight and that it fell to roosters to announce his birth. That's why the novena is also known as the "rooster's Masses" (Misas de gallo) – and the churches are filled to overflowing!

Simbang Gabi is a moment when rich and poor, men and women, children and elderly meet as a community to wait for the coming of the Lord on Christmas Day. The early timing of the Mass means that farmers and others can attend and still get to work on time.

Many people will light small star-shaped candles as reminders of the star of Bethlehem.

Loving Lord, as we prepare for your coming at Christmas, teach us to find happiness amid all the busy-ness. Teach us to celebrate the goodness in the hearts of the people around us.  Amen.

Feast of the week Sunday 12 December

Our Lady of Guadalupe

Our Lady is something of a linguist! When she appeared to St Bernadette, she spoke the same patois, or informal dialect, which was spoken by the people of Lourdes. At Fatima, the three children heard Portuguese.

Similarly, when she appeared to an Aztec peasant, Juan Diego, on 9 December 1531 near the town of Guadalupe, she used Nahuatl, his native language.

In the truly Mexican image subsequently imprinted on Diego's cloak when he appeared before

the bishop, Mary was dark-skinned like him and wore robes which immediately identified her as royalty. Her black sash showed that she was pregnant and the four-petalled floral decoration on her dress, which symbolised, to the Aztecs, the God above their many deities, declared her to be the Mother of God.

Our Lady of Guadalupe became the patroness of the Americas, but especially of the indigenous people of Mexico. Her most famous words spoken during her several appearances were, "Am I not here, I who am your mother?"

A mother speaks the same language as her children, doesn't she? Why should Our Lady be any different?

"Advent is a continuous call to hope: it reminds us that God is present in history to lead it to its ultimate goal, to lead it to its fullness, which is the Lord, the Lord Jesus Christ. God is present in the history of humanity. He is the 'God-with-us'. God is not distant: he is always with us, to the extent that very often he knocks on the door to our heart. God walks beside us to support us."

Pope Francis

Today:
Zephaniah 3:14-18
Philippians 4:4-7
Luke 3:10-18

Monday:
Numbers 24:2-7. 15-17
Matthew 21:23-27

Tuesday:
Zephaniah 3:1-2. 9-13
Matthew 21:28-32

Wednesday:
Isaiah 45:6-8. 18. 21-25
Luke 7:18-23

Thursday:
Isaiah 54:1-10
Luke 7:24-30

Friday:
Genesis 49:2. 8-10
Matthew 1:1-17

Saturday:
Jeremiah 23:5-8
Matthew 1:18-24

Next Sunday:
Micah 5:1-4
Hebrews 10:5-10
Luke 1:39-45

SUNDAY PLUS

Here I am!

CHRISTmas people



By Fr Richard Reid C.Ss.R.

We have almost a full week ahead of us before the mighty feast of the Lord's birth will be upon us. The temptation may be that we have been preparing for so long that we might be wishing the days away, hoping that it will soon be Christmas Day. However, think again. Before the Christ child was born, Mary, his mother, was travelling about trying to make sense of many things and she had the wonderful encounter with her cousin Elizabeth. The meeting of the two soon-to-be-mothers was a significant one that we in the Christian world still remember to this very day.

Elizabeth recognises the presence of her Lord as soon as she hears the greeting of Mary. Elizabeth

is herself filled with the Holy Spirit and she cries out in joy. Elizabeth is conscious of the reality of the Lord Jesus through her yet unborn son.

In the coming week let us be like Mary's cousin Elizabeth. Let us be filled with the Holy Spirit and spread CHRISTmas joy. Let us recognise the presence of Our Lord by giving witness to him to those around us. Let us always be clear that Christmas is not about a tree and turkey, nice and all as they are, but let us truly witness to the power and the reality of the Lord Jesus by everything we do and everything we say. Let the Holy Spirit make us CHRISTmas people.

Fr Richard Reid is the Provincial Superior of the Redemptorists' London Province.

"[Mary] is not passive, she is active. She does not defer to God: she cleaves to God. She is a woman in love prepared to serve her Lord completely and immediately. She could have asked for a little time to think it over, or even for more explanations about what would happen; perhaps she could have set some conditions... Instead, she does not take her time, she does not keep God waiting, she does not delay."

Pope Francis

The story of the poinsettia

An old Mexican legend tells of a poor girl called Pepita who had no present to place before the baby Jesus in the church crib. Her cousin Pedro encouraged her, saying that Jesus appreciates even the smallest gift from someone who loves him.

Stuck for ideas, Pepita arranged some roadside weeds into a small bouquet, embarrassed because she had nothing else to give the Baby Jesus.

As she approached the crib, she remembered Pedro's advice and ignored the critical remarks of

some parishioners. Suddenly, the bouquet of weeds burst into bright red leaves and everyone realised that they had seen a miracle, which is why, in Mexico, the poinsettia is also known as the "Flores de Noche Buena", or "Flowers of the Holy Night".

The shape of the poinsettia flower and leaves are often thought to symbolise the Star of Bethlehem which led the Magi to Jesus. The red leaves symbolise the blood which he would later shed on Calvary. White leaves represent his purity.

Feast of the week
Saturday 25 December


Christmas

Just a Little Donkey

Just a little donkey,
but on my back I bore
the one and only Saviour
the world was waiting for.
Just a little donkey,
but I was strong and proud;
I gladly carried Mary
through the chaos of the crowd.
I brought her to a stable
where she made a tiny bed...
a place for Baby Jesus
to lay his little head.
I pray the world remembers
that special Christmas night,
when just a little donkey
carried Heaven's precious light.

Author Unknown



Lord God, be with us as we prepare to welcome your Son Jesus into our hearts and lives at Christmas. Watch over, protect and bless our families and all those whom we love.  Amen.

A happy and blessed Christmas to you and yours from all of us at Redemptorist Publications.

Today: Micah 5:1-4 Hebrews 10:5-10 Luke 1:39-45	Monday: Isaiah 7:10-14 Luke 1:26-38	Tuesday: Song of Songs 2:8-14 Luke 1:39-45	Wednesday: 1 Samuel 1:24-28 Luke 1:46-56	Thursday: Malachi 3:1-4, 23-24 Luke 1:57-66	Friday: Mass in the Morning: 2 Samuel 7:1-5, 8-12, 14, 16 Luke 1:67-79	Saturday: Vigil Mass: Isaiah 62:1-5 Acts 13:16-17, 22-25 Matthew 1:1-25	Mass During the Night: Isaiah 9:1-7 Titus 2:11-14 Luke 2:1-14	Mass at Dawn: Isaiah 62:11-12 Titus 3:4-7 Luke 2:15-20	Mass During the Day: Isaiah 52:7-10 Hebrews 1:1-6 John 1:1-18	Next Sunday: 1 Samuel 1:20-22, 24-28 1 John 3:1-2, 21-24 Luke 2:41-52
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SUNDAY PLUS

Search for Jesus

God in the here-and-now



Holy Family sculpture by Josephina de Vasconcellos

By Paul Higginson


Today's Gospel tells us how Mary and Joseph lost Jesus and spent three days searching for him before finding him in the Temple. We are all, in our own way, searching for Christ, and many of us find this a difficult process. However, our desire to seek him, a desire put there by God, means that we have already chosen the right path: we are halfway there. "Search, and you shall find," says Jesus. He isn't playing hide and seek with us! Christ cannot make himself more visible – he is

everywhere in creation. St Bonaventure said that "God's fingerprints" are everywhere. Human love, forgiveness and compassion are divine love, forgiveness and compassion. This is the incarnation today, Christ enfleshed in the ordinary moments of our life. We can only ever experience God in the here-and-now; as St Paul says, "he is everything and he is in everything". Do we have the eyes to see the God who is everywhere and in everyone?

The one who searches will always find – and finding God is rarely a "thunderbolt moment", but a quiet and calm acceptance and realisation that he is with me, that I am loved, and that is enough, and all will be well. The Gospel of Jesus tells us that our life is not so much about reaching out to find God, but about God reaching out to find us.

God does not withhold himself from us, but we withhold ourselves from God. Finding God is really allowing God to find us.

Following many years in the classroom and as a parish catechist, Paul Higginson is finding that retirement is enabling him to devote even more of his time to supporting his parish.

Lord God, watch over, protect my family and all those whom I know and love. My family isn't perfect – and neither am I, but we are your gift to each other.  Amen.

The family: the "yes" of God

By Pope Francis

One might ask: does the Gospel continue to be a joy for the world? And also: does the family continue to be good news for today's world? I am sure the answer is yes! And this "yes" is firmly based on God's plan. The love of God is his "yes" to all creation and at the heart of the latter is man. It is God's "yes" to the union between man and woman, in openness and service to life in all its phases; it is God's "yes" and his commitment to a humanity that is often wounded, mistreated and dominated by a lack of love. The family, therefore, is the "yes" of God as love. Only starting from love can the family manifest, spread and regenerate God's love in the world. Without love, we cannot live as children of God, as couples, parents and brothers.

Letter announcing the Ninth World Meeting of Families in Dublin, 21-26 August 2018.

Feast of the week Saturday 1 January

Mary, Mother of God

Early Christians readily accepted Mary as the mother of Jesus, the man who was born, lived and died in Israel. After all, every human being has a mother. If Jesus was also God and Mary was his mother, then that logically made her the Mother of God. They even used the title "Theotokos", which literally means "God-bearer."

In the fifth century, theologians tried to explain how Jesus could be

both divine and human, immortal and mortal. If Jesus was truly God and truly human, was Mary, the human mother of Jesus, also the Mother of God? Was he one person or two inside the one body?

In 431 A.D. at the Council of Ephesus, the Church declared that Jesus was one person with a divine nature and a human nature. Mary didn't just give Jesus a human body: she gave birth to the whole person, Jesus, who was both God and man. That's why Mary is both the mother of the human Jesus and Mother of God.

"Do not forget the three phrases: 'excuse me', 'thank you', and 'I am sorry'. If there are these three phrases in a family, in a family environment, then the family is fine."

Pope Francis

Today: 1 Samuel 1:20-22, 24-28; 1 John 3:1-2, 21-24; Luke 2:41-52
Monday: 1 John 1:1-4; John 20:2-8
Tuesday: 1 John 1:5 – 2:2; Matthew 2:13-18
Wednesday: 1 John 2:3-11; Luke 2:22-35
(E): St Thomas Becket (Feast): Colossians 1:24-29; Luke 22:24-30 or Matthew 10:28-33
Thursday: 1 John 2:12-17; Luke 2:36-40
Friday: 1 John 2:18-21; John 1:1-18
Saturday: Numbers 6:22-27; Galatians 4:4-7; Luke 2:16-21
Next Sunday: Ecclesiasticus 24:1-2, 8-12; John 1:1-18
(S) Isaiah 60:1-6; Ephesians 3:2-3, 5-6; Matthew 2:1-12