

Homilies for Weekdays

Year I

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Don Talafous, O.S.B.



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Season of Advent

Monday of the First Week of Advent—*Call the doctor!*

Readings: Isa 4:2-6 (Year A); Isa 2:1-5 (Years B, C); Matt 8:5-11

Resp. Psalm: Ps 122:1-2, 3-4, 4cd-5, 6-7, 8-9 (L 175)—*Lectionary for Mass* number

“Lord, my servant is lying at home paralyzed, suffering dreadfully” (Matt 8:6). The opening verses of today’s Gospel give us in pictorial form the basics of the Christian story. Despite the happy days and moments that we hope prevail in our lives, we have to admit, given war, starvation, disease and poverty, that in a very real sense the human race lies paralyzed and often suffering dreadfully. At some time or other each of us can be so described. We hope, of course, that the phrase “suffering dreadfully” proves to be too strong. But for some friends and members of our families it may be literally true. And “paralyzed?” That may well describe our inner life: we seem so often inert, unable to move—at least stiff and not very resilient. We feel so heavy and lacking in spiritual zest. The beginning of Advent is another one of those much-needed calls to realize that now is the time to do something or, better yet, to be responsive to the Lord’s call and love. The Lord says: “I will come and cure him” (Matt 8:7). By birth as a fellow human being, the Lord comes to cure us all. In Advent we’re meant to learn how to say more genuinely, “Only say the word” (8:8), Lord, and I will be healed.

Tuesday of the First Week of Advent—

There’s more to see and hear

Readings: Isa 11:1-10; Luke 10:21-24

Resp. Psalm: Ps 72:1-2, 7-8, 12-13, 17 (L 176)

The words, phrases, and images which are so familiar to us from Christmas carols and pageants over the years come one after the other in the opening reading today. In the Gospel, as yesterday, we have a plea from the Lord for receptivity to the One who is to come and his message. God, Jesus tells us, reveals things hidden from the learned and clever to mere children. How do children differ from the learned and clever? The little ones are, in this contrast, individuals open to instruction, to

learning something new, to being helped. From business, education, sports, and so many areas in our lives we know how absolutely essential is a stance of receptivity. The would-be golfer who will not admit that he or she needs instruction blocks his or her progress. The new person in the office who can't bother to be taught the ropes will not be able to function. The student who defies the teacher to teach goes nowhere. If we bring a child-like willingness to be taught, to be led, and to be helped to the Savior, we open ourselves to the grace and power of this season. The Son truly achieves the purpose of his entering into our world, revealing God and the divine love, if there is space in our hearts for something more than self and satisfactions. The blessing of Christmas for any one of us will be in proportion to our willingness to have our eyes and ears opened by the Lord. An attitude of smug and closed satisfaction prevents anything new from coming into our lives. The childlikeness commended by the Lord consists in a willingness to believe that there is more to see and more to hear than we see and hear so far.

Wednesday of the First Week of Advent—

A dinner fit for a believer

Readings: Isa 25:6-10a; Matt 15:29-37

Resp. Psalm: Ps 23:1-3a, 3b-4, 5, 6 (L 177)

A friend of mine who enjoys food very much says too obviously, "When it comes to eating, there's nothing like food." No matter at what level of sophistication our taste may be or our means allow, we all value food as an essential of daily life. C. S. Lewis says that God invented eating. Both readings today speak of it. Isaiah presents good and plentiful food as a sign of the time of the Messiah. In the Gospel Jesus fulfills this expectation by multiplying loaves and fish for the crowd. Satisfying our desire for good and necessary nourishment is an obvious way to indicate what God wants to do for us. Our practices of giving gifts of food to friends, invalids, and those who are grieving all echo God's care for us and continue it. If we refuse a third helping at grandma's, she's likely to take it as rejection. The image of food also reminds us to expect the necessary inspiration and strength—in other words, our nourishment—for our lives as Christians from the Lord. Just as we try to be careful about what kind of food we buy for our families, so we should be choosy about what food we give our spirit. Quality food, rich in protein and low in starch and sugar, is the food we receive from the Lord. If we live by it, in the Eucharist and the Scripture, we will, like the crowd in the Gospel, eat and be satisfied.

Thursday of the First Week of Advent—

Don't just stand there; do something

Readings: Isa 26:1-6; Matt 7:21, 24-27

Resp. Psalm: Ps 118:1 and 8-9, 19-21, 25-27a (L 178)

Aren't we afraid that the message of those first days of Advent is a bit too passive? The readings told us in one way or another to be open; receptive; ready to hear, see, and learn; and the Lord will come and do new things in us. Our part is to receive and accept, to be passive. Much of Scripture does insist on the initiative of God and that all good things begin in God's goodness to us. But, true as that may be, Scripture is never so simply one-sided nor so easily summarized. Today any such oversimplification is shot down. Jesus says very boldly: "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the Kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven" (Matt 7:21). Essential as it is to cry out to the Lord from our need, it is not enough, he says. We have to do something, too; we have to show some evidence of good will; we have to make some effort. The practical implementation of the Lord's words, the evidence for our good will in the way we treat the neighbor, the poor, and the suffering—this is absolutely irreplaceable. Either/or language may make for memorable sayings, but reality is always more complex. In Scripture, taken as a whole, it is never simply a matter of the Lord's doing it all nor everything being up to us. God saves us, but not apart from ourselves.

Friday of the First Week of Advent—

My light and my salvation

Readings: Isa 29:17-24; Matt 9:27-31

Resp. Psalm: Ps 27:1, 4, 13-14 (L 179)

The psalm used between today's readings is one of the most uplifting of all the psalms and deserves to be well known and often used. Many of us would find it inspiring and encouraging. It is very appropriate today when we read of Jesus giving sight back to two blind men who expressed their confidence in him. "The Lord is my light," goes the responsorial psalm, "and my salvation" (Ps 27:1). The more we get to know ourselves (and that is a lifetime study), the more we recognize how blind we can be. We are blind often to our own irritating traits. We are blind to the generous and inspiring qualities of those closest to us. We are blind to the signs of God's love and care for us in the world around us. We are blind to sources of beauty and joy around us. Our

blindness often shows itself in our complaining and in our dissatisfaction with our lot. Prayer that the light of God may shine in our hearts and take away this blindness is necessary. Further, we learn where we are blind by taking seriously others' criticisms or comments; we learn more of it by honestly looking at ourselves in the light of Jesus' teaching. The appearance of the Messiah, Christ, is again and again spoken of in terms of light eliminating darkness and gloom as in today's first reading. As we share the Body and Blood of Christ today, a good prayer would be that this light shine in every corner of our soul and our life: "You are my light, my salvation, Lord" (Ps 27:1).

Saturday of the First Week of Advent—

No unemployment problem

Readings: Isa 30:19-21, 23-26; Matt 9:35-10:1, 5a, 6-8

Resp. Psalm: Ps 147:1-2, 3-4, 5-6 (L 180)

"The harvest is abundant but the laborers are few" (Matt 9:37). In a time like the present with a scarcity of candidates for the celibate, male priesthood, we sometimes hear this line of our Lord's quoted simply in terms of that problem. The context of today's reading, however, suggests that the poor masses of humanity, the diseased and other poor who are confused about life itself, need all the help they can get, not only from priests. Although Jesus cured "every disease and illness" (9:35), he left a lot for his followers to do. There is room for more competition to do this healing work all over the world, above all where we are. And many people do this sort of thing. One is continually impressed at how retired people are using the talents and skills they developed during their working years for others. One gives a day to the St. Vincent de Paul Society; another serves on diocesan or parish committees where his or her particular knowledge of employees' compensation is valuable; others extend the healing hand of Christ by visiting, comforting the elderly and disabled, and bringing them Communion. Most of us can find a place where our volunteering would make a difference for others, no matter what our age. We all qualify as the laborers needed for the harvest.

Monday of the Second Week of Advent—

What to accept, what to change

Readings: Isa 35:1-10; Luke 5:17-26

Resp. Psalm: Ps 85:9ab and 10, 11-12, 13-14 (L 181)

To endure the moment, the day, and even longer periods, we realistically sometimes accept the way things are—at least for now. But texts like today's first reading from Isaiah and the fact of our Lord's curing of the paralytic tell us that ultimately God does not stand for hunger, war, suffering, fear, and disease, nor even for infertile land, drought, and thirst. The desert blooms; the fearful and weak are strengthened; the blind, the deaf, and the lame are cured. All this calls us to hope and action, beyond the resignation that must be at times. People fed by the Body and Blood of the Lord and joined to him in closest union can continue the work of healing. Advent's frequent picturing of the beauty and glory of the time of the Messiah must not simply lull us into warm Christmas-card reveries, but enkindle our hope and drive our action. Today's readings offer good opportunity to reflect on this age-old question in the context of our own lives. How much of what is wrong around us (at home, at work, in the community) must we accept at least now; and what can we hope, with God's help, to change?

Tuesday of the Second Week of Advent—

The lost and forgotten

Readings: Isa 40:1-11; Matt 18:12-14

Resp. Psalm: Ps 96:1-2, 3 and 10ac, 11-12, 13 (L 182)

Too often it seems that the people who are well known and much appreciated just get more of the same, while the neglected, forgotten, unloved, homeless, and abandoned are left that way. How many of us take the initiative to seek out the people most in need? It is so much easier to spend time and attention on those with whom we feel comfortable, those who understand and appreciate us. Yet one of the distinguishing marks of the One whose coming we await is that he comes especially for the lost and forgotten. Both readings today use the image of the shepherd caring for his flock and the Gospel speaks of the shepherd leaving ninety-nine sheep in order to look for the one that is lost. This picture is another description of what God does in sending the Son to take on a human life. The lost in our society are obvious enough, especially in our cities: the homeless, the street people including children, the abused, the abandoned, and the unemployed. Then there are the victims of human greed throughout the world, the starving, and the poor. In imitation of the Lord, we Christians have been empowered to do what is in our capacity to come to the aid of these lost people. Further reflection also makes clear that all of us in some sense are among the lost whom Christ came to find and save. We may need to work at really

praying and at paying more attention to the suffering and lonely in our midst; we need to work at our anger and impatience and our neglect of responsibilities and commitments. Each of us knows what there is in ourselves that especially calls out for healing and restoration.

Wednesday of the Second Week of Advent—

New vigor and fervor

Readings: Isa 40:25-31; Matt 11:28-30
Resp. Psalm: Ps 103:1-2, 3-4, 8 and 10 (L 183)

Some of our heaviness, weariness, and apparent lack of energy is not simply due to the flu, being overworked, anemia, or mononucleosis. It might also stem from expecting the verve and the enthusiasm to come solely from ourselves and our natural vigor. Natural vigor and energy are not at all to be despised; in fact, having them places on us a greater responsibility—the requirement that we use them for the benefit of the more weary and weak. But even the most buoyant and bubbly among us may feel the blahs some time, a certain listlessness, indifference, ennui. “Come to me, all you who labor and are burdened, and I will give you rest” (Matt 11:28). Learning to rely more on the Lord and to expect all from God; allowing ourselves to be carried along on the energy and rhythm of God’s life—this kind of surrender can fill us with a divine vitality and an ease in much that we do. His yoke is lighter and more truly adapted to us than the burdens we allow our society and its competitive spirit to place on us. No matter how important our participation in the life of our world is for ourselves, our families, and the world itself, it helps to step back and see that it is not of final importance. Surrender to the power and grace of God and allowing God more space within us and in our thoughts and desires is the way to more peace and quiet, more ease and joy. “They that hope in the LORD will renew their strength, they will soar as with eagles’ wings; they will run and not grow weary, walk and not grow faint” (Isa 40:31).

Thursday of the Second Week of Advent—

Self-help and other help

Readings: Isa 41:13-20; Matt 11:11-15
Resp. Psalm: Ps 145:1 and 9, 10-11, 12-13ab (L 184)

The reading from Isaiah captures as well as anything the problem many people have with the Christian faith. In this we hear the Lord

say to us, “Fear not, I will help you” (Isa 41:13). The Lord answers the needs of the afflicted and needy. “I will turn the desert into a marshland” (41:18), and much more. God does all this; God satisfies our needs; God delivers us from all ills. We, on the contrary, have been taught and we hear that everything we need for health and happiness lies within us, within our own powers: “You can do or be anything you want to.” Any little grade-schooler can grow up to be president, etc. In many bookstores, self-help materials pretty well replace religion as we know it. Self-help instead of God-help seems to reign. The very idea that God should send the Son to save us (not simply to show us how to save ourselves) is utterly opposed to much in the spirit of our age. We are like two-year-olds, anxious to be independent, anxious to walk by ourselves even if it means falling on our face. A recognition of sin, as we saw earlier this week, and a recognition that our salvation or deliverance has to come from outside ourselves are two very hard truths for our age—very difficult facts, possibly, for human nature any time. To surrender to God by trustingly turning over the controls to God is one attitude Advent can teach us.

Friday of the Second Week of Advent—

There’s no pleasing some people

Readings: Isa 48:17-19; Matt 11:16-19

Resp. Psalm: Ps 1:1-2, 3, 4 and 6 (L 185)

“There’s no pleasing some people.” We’ve all heard or used some similar phrase at times. If, for whatever reason, some people oppose us or oppose a public figure, there is almost nothing that we or they can do which is not criticized. The words of Jesus in today’s Gospel, of course, refer to his life among his contemporaries who, out of envy or fear, jumped at every opportunity to fault him. If he fasts, they say he is mad; if he eats and drinks with the wrong people, he’s a drunk and glutton. There are at least two applications to our own lives. First, we can expect that if we put ourselves out to undertake anything worthwhile in public, there will be carping from several contradictory directions. Service doesn’t infallibly bring appreciation. Second, we learn to temper our own criticism of others who are trying to do something worthwhile. Genuine incompetence and crookedness should be exposed, but so often our faultfinding is merely petty and negative and does nothing to help the situation. “There’s no pleasing some people.”

Saturday of the Second Week of Advent—

The crib and the Cross

Readings: Sir 48:1-4, 9-11; Matt 17:9a, 10-13

Resp. Psalm: Ps 80:2ac and 3b, 15-16, 18-19 (L 186)

No more than we can forget the poor and suffering and the victims of so much of the world's cruelty and indifference, can we in Advent forget the suffering of the Savior. Speaking of John the Baptist today, Jesus says that in him Elijah has come and they "did to him whatever they pleased." "So also will the Son of Man suffer at their hands" (Matt 17:12). This seems to be a reference to the way John was beheaded by the king for his straightforward speaking out and a reference to how Jesus will suffer at the hands of the authorities. Jesus, the prophets, and John the Baptist all shared in the hostility of fellow human beings to the message of God and to the Good News. On a most general level and in a way applicable to all of us, the point is that coming close to God and allowing God entry into our lives inevitably entails some suffering. On an even broader level, we may say that no good thing is accomplished by any of us without the acceptance of some suffering, pain, and at least minimal difficulty involved in the undertaking. Advent—which celebrates the initial steps in our relation to God and our opening ourselves to God—adds this note about suffering in order to be realistic about what discipleship entails. Human life, as the celebration of the Nativity of the Lord shows eloquently, is shot through with a mixture of sadness and joy, pain and pleasure, life and death. As we enter into the warmth, cheer, and good will of the Christmas season, we can be more aware of and practically concerned about those in our midst who do not share our joy but share so much of the Cross.

Monday of the Third Week of Advent—Commitment

Readings: Num 24:2-7, 15-17a; Matt 21:23-27

Resp. Psalm: Ps 25:4-5ab, 6 and 7bc, 8-9 (L 187)

Avoiding commitment might be a good way to describe the chief priests and elders who question Jesus in today's Gospel. Whether it's John the Baptist or Jesus, it's the same thing; they are met by people who look for ways to avoid a decision and avoid any commitment. Commitment certainly carries with it risks and we should think, reflect, and weigh these risks before we make serious commitments. Friends, parents, priests, and counselors all urge this on those thinking of marriage. In one sense, our society is all too aware of the seriousness of commitment; in fact, there

seems to be a great fear of any commitment beyond the next ten minutes or so. The chief priests and elders of today's Gospel had other personal reasons for fearing commitment; they feared for their own authority and position. They gave too much weight to their relation to the political powers and to their position in that society. Part of our annual preparation for the celebration of the birth of the Lord is the renewal of our own commitment to Christ. We may dither around about too many secondary things, and thus put off making a fuller commitment of our lives to Christ. We may paralyze any likelihood of commitment by endless discussion and worry. We may fear what the consequences and demands of a commitment may be. But all this only highlights our need to explore the nature and depth of our commitment to Christ during this Advent.

Tuesday of the Third Week of Advent—

Yes or No or "I dunno"

Readings: Zeph 3:1-2, 9-13; Matt 21:28-32
Resp. Psalm: Ps 34:2-3, 6-7, 17-18, 19 and 23 (L 188)

At some time in our lives we have said to the Lord with the elder son in the Gospel, Yes, I am on my way. Like him, we may still be sitting at the breakfast table dawdling over the comics, not much nearer to the vineyard and the work we promised. An essential part of Advent for all of us is repentance—a recognition that we have failed coupled with a will to change. We may have in effect said "no" by our inertia or putting things off. Continuing yesterday's theme, today's Gospel holds up commitment for us to look at it and think about. What does our yes to new life in Christ which we repeat every Easter mean? The son in today's Gospel who said "yes" and then did nothing suggests that we look at the content of our commitment. At this or any Eucharist, we offer our lives and work to God through Christ. Through him also we have the energy and strength to carry out our promises and decisions, our yes. Most of us may need to emphasize more in our prayer a trusting petition for God's grace to make us more generous and active in carrying out that original yes.

Wednesday of the Third Week of Advent—Which guru?

Readings: Isa 45:6c-8, 18, 21c-25; Luke 7:18b-23
Resp. Psalm: Ps 85:9ab and 10, 11-12, 13-14 (L 189)

Are we awaiting he who is to come or "should we look for another?" (Luke 7:19). The One whose coming we await in this Advent season is

called in John's Gospel the "Word of God," the sum total of what God has to say to the world and to us. Do we expect enough from Christ, from his word, and from the sacraments? So often it seems we give them a back seat, while some current guru or popular teacher on TV with a book or a seminar gets most of our attention and effort and even at times quite a bit of our money. Don't we often look for someone else when we have not given sufficient time and thought to the word of God? The opportunities to study the Scriptures in groups or alone abound today, but so often we Christians have never given God's word persevering and generous attention. We could gauge the reality of our devotion to God's word by asking how much time and reflection we are willing to give it. The word speaks to us of he who is to come, but only if we allow it some space in our lives. The words of Isaiah today are absolute, and a good reminder to us of what position God's word should have in our thought and heart: "Turn to me and be safe, all you ends of the earth, for I am God; there is no other!" (Isa 45:22).

Thursday of the Third Week of Advent—

Endless thanksgiving

Readings: Isa 54:1-10; Luke 7:24-30

Resp. Psalm: Ps 30:2 and 4, 5-6, 11-12a and 13b (L 190)

We don't often focus the homily on the responsorial psalm, but today's psalm is one of those gems that would enrich anyone's inner life and relation to God. It is full of thanksgiving for God's deliverance, a theme which is probably applicable to the life of any one of us. Looking back, we can all find instances of how we were saved from difficult or trying situations or given a new outlook on a desperate situation. The God of Judaism and Christianity is not, of course, a short order cook at a fast food place. Our faith, trust, and thanksgiving are not based on some magical certainty that God will free us from the hardships, pains, and difficulties of ordinary life, if we only ask. God's care and love for us show themselves often—usually, in less obvious ways. We may remain with our physical ailment, but hopefully we have learned through prayer a better way of facing it. We may see how our freedom from a damaging and fearful episode in our life took a form we could not have predicted or asked for. Our responsorial phrase is: "I will praise you, Lord, for you have rescued me" (Ps 30:2). "You changed my mourning into dancing; O LORD, my God, forever will I give you thanks" (30:12-13). To come to a position of continual thanksgiving is a central goal of Christian life, and enough reflection on our life in the light of our faith

can show us all how appropriate this is. The central act of our faith is the Eucharist, thanksgiving in and with the Lord.

Friday of the Third Week of Advent—*Who needs testimony?*

Readings: Isa 56:1-3a, 6-8; John 5:33-36
Resp. Psalm: Isa 56:1-3a, 6-8 (L 191)

“Better to light one candle than to curse the darkness.” By now we’ve all heard this saying. John, Jesus says, was a “burning and shining lamp,” and elsewhere in John’s Gospel Jesus says of himself, “I am the light of the world” (John 8:12; 9:5). Jesus says that his works testify to him and certainly, as we know from elsewhere in Scripture, our works and our lives testify to what we believe and to the Lord in whom we hope and trust. But then Jesus says rather disconcertingly in today’s Gospel that he does not need our testimony; in fact, he does not even accept it. But perhaps it’s we who need our testimony to the Lord? Don’t we need each other’s testimony in our weakness and fear? Our often faltering and frail faith benefits when we see or hear others testify to their trust and hope, often when they are in much more difficult straits than ours. Testimony of the kind we need doesn’t have to be in stirring words. In fact, we are probably more impressed by another’s life and example than by mere words. We need the help of others. The strong, silent loner is more fiction than reality. Real people are aware of how much they depend on others and how much they influence others, for good or ill, by their lives and actions.

December 17—*An all-inclusive genealogy*

Readings: Gen 49:2, 8-10; Matt 1:1-17
Resp. Psalm: Ps 72:1-2, 3-4ab, 7-8, 17 (L 193)

“Obed became the father of Jesse, Jesse the father of David the king” (Matt 1:5-6). The list of ancestors of Jesus with their strange names may seem dull and irrelevant to us, but it was important to the Jews of Christ’s time. It showed that the person in question was truly a Jew and truly a member of the people of the covenant. Implicitly, of course, in doing this it also makes plain that this person is truly a human being. There are some peculiarities in this particular list tracing Jesus’ lineage back to Abraham; it shows a family tree which is by no means completely Jewish. Among Jesus’ ancestors are non-Jewish women and women of ill repute. The very inclusion of women in the genealogy runs counter to the usual practice of tracing lineage only through the

male line. Jesus is truly human. He comes as the Savior of not only the Chosen People but of all peoples and not only of men but also of women; he likewise comes very clearly for sinners and not just for those of unquestioned probity. The genealogy may seem boring to us, yet this information about the various people in Jesus' background is really not what we would expect, for it includes sinners and non-Jews. All this was quite revolutionary for those who heard; it was the unexpected and "good" news. In our day when exclusion of others for race, ethnic background, sexual orientation, or unusual customs is, unfortunately, still all too prevalent, we may need to take the lessons of this family tree more to heart, more seriously. The Messiah comes for everyone.

December 18—*What does the Messiah mean to me?*

Readings: Jer 23:5-8; Matt 1:18-25

Resp. Psalm: Ps 72:1-2, 12-13, 18-19 (L 194)

Today Jeremiah says the coming Messiah, the king to come, will be the "righteous shoot" (Jer 23:5). The text tells of how the Israelites have always referred to the Lord as the one who brought them out of slavery in Egypt; now, in different circumstances, they speak of the Lord who brought them back from exile, "up from the land of the north" (23:8). In the Gospel the angel says, "You are to name him Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins" (Matt 1:21). Between the two texts we have three ways of looking at or speaking of what the Lord does: he saves his people from harsh servitude; he brings them back from exile; and he saves them from sin. One of the three should fit each of us specifically. Either, one, we have been under the domination of some habit or tendency which has amounted to a kind of slavery. Or, two, we have simply been distant from God (in exile); our prayer life has been perfunctory and superficial; we have not developed a genuine relation with God. Or, three, we have sinned in some way which has cast a dark shadow over our life. While being in exile, slavery, and sin have different tonalities, each can also be used interchangeably for our situation. To lack a close relation to God is a kind of exile; to be under the domination of the world's standards and values is a kind of slavery. *Jesus, come, save us from our sins; be Emmanuel for us, be God with us in all the moments of this day.*

December 19—*The future is open*

Readings: Judg 13:2-7, 24-25a; Luke 1:5-25

Resp. Psalm: Ps 71:3-4a, 5-6ab, 16-17 (L 195)

Two unlikely pregnancies urge an always necessary lesson, one we need to hear during this Advent and any time: there can be new beginnings and the unexpected can happen; things can change. Better yet, God can bring about the unexpected. Around us there are people who believe and teach that we have no choice about what happens in our lives; it is all settled in advance by our chemistry, genes, heredity, etc. There are others who come to the same conclusion in a less scientific way. They are the people we hear so often say after the death of a young person in an accident, "His time was up; it was meant to be." In the shock of grief, of course, many of us do not think clearly. But this certainly sounds like what we call "fatalism." Couldn't the young man have had fewer drinks? Couldn't there have been better lighting on that stretch of the highway by the cliff? Couldn't he have accepted that friend's offer to drive him home? There are many instances in human life where a different exercise of our freedom or better use of technology or science could have changed things. And, as these stories illustrate, there is also the fact of God's initiative. We too easily buy the fatalism and resignation which are around us. Advent and Christmas tell us that God and our freedom can make things different. We need more confidence in both—in God and our freedom, in that order.

December 20—*How to hear and respond*

Readings: Isa 7:10-14; Luke 1:26-38

Resp. Psalm: Ps 24:1-2, 3-4ab, 5-6 (L 196)

Too often we tend to forget or ignore the fact that some popular practices of Catholic piety are rooted in the Bible. Today's Gospel suggests, for one, devotion to angels—recently pretty close to a fad in our otherwise secular world. And then there is that prayer which seems so exclusively Catholic to many, the Hail Mary. That, too, has its origins in the opening chapters of Luke's Gospel. We hear the first part of it today in the angel's greeting to Mary: "Hail, full of grace! The Lord is with you" (Luke 1:28). The next part of the Hail Mary prayer comes in Elizabeth's words to Mary, a little later in the same chapter of Luke. Honoring Mary with these words is doing nothing less than what the angel of the annunciation did. The last part of today's Gospel gives us probably the most basic reason why we give Mary such an exalted position. She is the model for how we Christians best receive the word of God: "I am the handmaid of the Lord. May it be done to me according to your word" (1:38). If it means anything for us to regard Scripture as the standard for our belief and Christian life, then this is a good example.

We find in Scripture models for our response to God. Like Mary, our willingness to be receptive to God's word can bring forth in our lives and for the world much good. The effectiveness of our Communion at Mass relies on such receptivity in us to God's grace.

December 21—*Where to put our confidence*

Readings: Cant 2:8-14 or Zeph 3:14-18a; Luke 1:39-45
Resp. Psalm: Ps 33:2-3, 11-12, 20-21 (L 197)

Much of the motivational talk of our culture is built around telling us that we can do anything with the right sort of self-confidence. Elizabeth today commends Mary because the great things happening to her are the result of her trust in God: "Blessed are you who believed that what was spoken to you by the Lord would be fulfilled" (Luke 1:45). In the face of so much apparently successful stress on self-confidence in our society, Christians need to take what is of value in that and join it to the confidence in God which fills the pages of Scripture. Confidence in God does not replace the appropriate confidence in ourselves or our God-given powers that functioning in ordinary life requires. Figuring out the relationship of the two kinds of confidence is not simple and, in many ways, is the work of a lifetime. It seems that coming to appreciate how much we need to trust God is the result of experience and living. We can't force that insight on young people, for example, who must learn some decent confidence in themselves and in their powers. To constantly repress that or downplay it seems likely to produce fearful, hesitant people. All of us must be allowed to learn by trial and error and through experience the limits and capabilities of our own powers. Ultimately it seems that any thoughtful and prayerful person reaches the point of appreciating more profoundly how much we depend on the power and help of God. Blessed is she or he who trusts that God's promises will be fulfilled in his or her regard.

December 22—*Turning things upside down*

Readings: 1 Sam 1:24-28; Luke 1:46-56
Resp. Psalm: 1 Sam 2:1, 4-5, 6-7, 8abcd (L 198)

Yesterday we heard where the center of our joy at Christmas should be: in the Savior. Mary's song, the *Magnificat* (the text for today's Gospel) spells out what the Savior does. It is almost comforting to realize that the singing of this canticle by Christians has at times been considered subversive by repressive regimes. It confirms that Christ's

coming and teaching can have a powerful impact even in the present. One of the persisting criticisms of Christians has always been that we are only interested in the future, the world to come, and, consequently, preach acceptance of injustice now in view of eternal hope. The coming of Christ, in practice, should herald the introduction of concern for the lowly and the hungry in our world. Whether it does that or not, of course, depends on our willing cooperation with God's desire for justice and compassion. Preachers of class hatred, racial prejudice, and selfishness (whether religious or political) should not expect or find support among Christians. Our God comes to confuse the proud, depose the mighty, and raise up the lowly.

December 23—*The great reconciler*

Readings: Mal 3:1-4, 23-24; Luke 1:57-66

Resp. Psalm: Ps 25:4-5ab, 8-9, 10 and 14 (L 199)

"To turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers" (Mal 3:24). The task of John the Baptist described in the reading from the prophet Malachi is one of reconciliation; that is the way he prepares people for the Lord who is to come. That is certainly part of our preparation for the hoped-for entry of the Lord into our lives. Our willingness to be reconciled, to forgive, and to ask forgiveness is not a luxury, but an essential part of our preparation. Christmas, like Easter, is genuinely celebrated if we are willing to be reconciled and to begin anew relationships soured by past events. As the words of Malachi suggest, that reconciliation is often most needed with those we are closest to: family members and friends. The Christ who comes does not change our vindictive and spiteful hearts and thoughts independently of our willingness. But he welcomes and perfects our turning to love and our willingness to be reconciled.

December 24—*Evidence of hope and life*

Readings: 2 Sam 7:1-5, 8b-12, 14a, 16; Luke 1:67-79

Resp. Psalm: Ps 89:2-3, 4-5, 27 and 29 (L 200)

On a day when everyone else is engaged in last minute preparation for Christmas (gift buying, giving, food preparation, more Christmas cards) those at Mass this day before Christmas are undoubtedly a dedicated group. In contrast to the frenzy around us, we gather to prepare in another way for the coming of the Lord. The words we hear are those of one who can't wait; they speak of salvation already

accomplished, already here although there is still one more day until we celebrate the birth of the Savior. The words of Zechariah about his son, John (to be called the Baptizer) sound like a hymn to the complete salvation brought by the Messiah. God has ransomed his people; has given us salvation from our enemies; and has shone on us in our darkness with light to “guide our feet into the way of peace” (Luke 1:79). To appreciate what Jesus brings, we need some sense of the darkness of a world without him and a sense of how the threat of death hangs over our existence. On this day before Christmas, think of what our world and life would be like without the hope, strength, and encouragement we get from believing in Jesus, hearing his word, and sharing his life in this Eucharist. Many of our contemporaries do live in darkness—unsure of what it’s all about, where it’s going, why we’re here. Some do live oppressed by fear of death and the void and emptiness they see beyond this life. But, with Zechariah, we believe that in Jesus God has shone “on those who dwell in darkness and the shadow of death.” Christians feel it is their mission to evidence the joy and light which come with Christ. They know a joy much more profound than whatever comes from abundance of food and drink, from gifts and giving, and even from friends and family.