

FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT

December 2, 2007 – Cycle A

Open with a prayer: *God of history, present, past and future, be with us as we begin our Advent journey. Make us aware of your presence in one another and in all creation. Prepare us to celebrate your birth and to anticipate your coming at the end of time. Protect us from deeds of darkness and shed your light upon us. Help us to be spiritually awake to your comings in the events and encounters of daily life. We ask this through Christ our Lord, Amen.*

Sharing of life question: What do you like and dislike most about this season of the year?

Facilitator reads focus statement: This weekend we begin a new Liturgical Year with the Advent/Christmas Season. Four weeks of *Advent* prepares us to celebrate the First Coming of Jesus in Bethlehem. But it also urges us to be ready for his Second Coming and for his comings into our daily lives. During the *Twelve Days of Christmas*, we celebrate the manifestation of Jesus to the Jewish and Gentile world.

In this week's gospel and second reading, we notice a strong note of urgency concerning *readiness* for Christ's Second Coming. In the First Reading, Isaiah offers a *word of hope* to his people who are living through a very difficult time.

If you have not read the commentary prior to the meeting, consider reading it before or after you read the scripture readings.

FIRST READING: Isaiah 2:1-5

Isaiah lived at a time when Israel was divided into two kingdoms – both of which were being threatened by the powerful Assyrians. Even though the reading appears to be predicting future events, the prophet is seeking to instruct his people on how to be faithful to their covenant relationship with God at this time. In a time of darkness, the prophet offers his people words of hope. If they are faithful to God, they will have peace and other nations will come to Jerusalem to hear the truth that God has for them. And if they remain faithful to their covenant with God, their political enemies will seek peace and not war.

RESPONSORIAL PSALM 122

In this song of joy and praise, the pilgrim proclaims the centrality of Jerusalem in Israel's life.

SECOND READING: Romans 13:11-14

We hear in this reading the note of urgency that we hear from Jesus in the Gospel. Even though Paul is writing to a Christian community who has accepted Christ, their total conversion to his ways is far from complete. Hence, he urges them to “throw off deeds of darkness” - naming six such deeds and to put on “the armor of light”. During this season of Advent, the church urges us to do the same. We too must look into our hearts and with the help of the Holy Spirit name those things in our lives that are

preventing us from a whole hearted commitment to Jesus.

GOSPEL: MATTHEW 24:37-44

In this passage, Jesus is instructing his disciples on the importance of readiness for his *Second Coming*. To drive home his lesson, Jesus draws on what happened to people who did not prepare for the Great Flood. They knew it was coming; but they were so consumed with the stuff of everyday life that they failed to prepare. One exception was Noah who did prepare and was saved. Like Noah we, the followers of Jesus, should be prepared for his Second Coming. The reference to the “two men” and “two women” is one of contrast. Externally, they seem alike, but internally one is prepared for God's coming and the other is not. The clear message in this Gospel is: “Be ready” and “be prepared”. By selecting this reading for the first Sunday of Advent, the church is urging us to live our lives in *readiness* for the Lord's coming at the end of time, whether that *end time* is the culminating event of our individual lives or of all of human history.

FAITH SHARING QUESTIONS

1. What verse or image spoke to you most? Why?
2. Why do we and/or others seem to think that ‘weapons of war’ are the only way or *main way* to achieve peace?

3. In a season when most people are asleep to the spiritual aspect of this season, what attitudes or spiritual exercises can help you to “stay awake” to the Lord’s comings into the events and encounters of these sacred weeks? What can help you to be not so consumed with the stuff in your daily life?

4. For you, what concretely does fidelity to your covenant relationship with God mean or involve?

RESPONDING TO THE WORD

Name one way you can act on today’s reading. Suggestion: If there is conflict and unforgiveness in your life consider preparing for the Prince of Peace by placing your ‘sword into plowshare’ and by trying to create an atmosphere of peace.

CONCLUDE WITH PRAYERS OF PETITION AND INTERCESSION

Pray for the grace to know what attitudes and spiritual exercises can help you to stay awake to God’s presence and activity in your life? Pray for our leaders that they may find peaceful ways to resolve conflicts. ©

SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT

December 9, 2007 A

Open with a prayer: Father, in heaven, our hearts desire the warmth of your love and our minds are searching for the light of your Word. Increase our longing for Christ our Savior and give us the strength to grow in love, that the dawn of his coming may find us rejoicing in his presence and welcoming the light of his truth. This we ask through Christ our Lord, Amen.

Sharing of life question: What are you most and least grateful for this week?

Facilitator reads focus statement: There is a shift in focus from the Second coming of the Lord to his historical birth as the Sunday's of the Advent season unfold. Today's first reading blends the two, but reflects a growing emphasis on the coming of the Messiah. Isaiah's disillusionment with the kings of his own time led him to dream about an ideal king who would rule the people with the mind and heart of God. In the Gospel, John the Baptist is preparing the people for the coming of the ideal or messianic king. In the second reading, Paul tells his readers that Christ is the fulfillment of God's promises to the Israelites.

If you have not read the commentary prior to the meeting, consider reading it before or after you read the scripture readings.

FIRST READING: Isaiah 11:1-10

Disillusioned with the King Ahaz, a contemporary of Isaiah, Isaiah assures his people that God will raise up a faithful king who will rule his people with the mind and heart of God. This new king will come from the 'stump of Jesse' (David's father). "Stump" implies that the house of Jesse and his descendents have been cut down and the monarchy has been defeated. But appearances are deceptive, for out of this seemingly defeated stump will sprout a shoot – a new plant upon which the Spirit of the Lord will rest. Even though Isaiah, most likely had in mind the yet-to-be born King Hezekiah who lived close to his time, Christians have seen Christ as the ideal King spoken of by Isaiah. The reading lists several divine gifts that will be bestowed on a future King to enable him to rule in a way pleasing to God. (These "Isaian gifts" of the Spirit are the ones we learned about when preparing for the Sacrament of Confirmation.)

Then Isaiah dreams or imagines a time when a wonderful peace will reign in the land of Israel. Enemies will live in harmony with each other. The King springing from the stump of Jesse will be so divinely inspired that even the Gentiles will seek him out.

RESPONSORIAL PSALM 72

In this royal psalm, the psalmist asks God to bless the King, especially with justice, so that he can in turn bless his people and help them to experience justice and peace in their lives.

SECOND READING: Romans 15:4-9

Paul is writing to a community that has both Jewish and Gentile Christians, a community that has very dedicated followers of Christ and ones not so dedicated. In this reading, Paul strongly exhorts all members of the Roman Christian community to be patient with each other and to live together in "perfect harmony". They should accept each other as Christ accepted them. Their unity and mutual respect will glorify God.

GOSPEL: Matthew 3:1-12

Each year on the second Sunday of Advent, we meet John the Baptist out in the desert where he is seeking to prepare large crowds for the coming of Jesus. His message is identical to Jesus' "Repent for the Kingdom of God is at hand" (Matt. 4:1-7). The "repentance" that John called for was not attention to the externals of one's religion. Rather, John called for a total change of mind and heart, which would manifest itself in "good fruits" like prayerfulness, justice in one's relationships with others. Such a change of heart and behavior would prepare people to welcome the Messiah and his message.

John shows little patience for the insincere Pharisees who step forward for his baptism. In his eyes, they do not manifest the "true fruits of repentance". They are only going through the motions of conversion perhaps to look good in the eyes of people who are so drawn to John's message.

It would seem that when Matthew was writing his Gospel about fifty years after Jesus' death to a

largely Jewish audience, there may have been some competition between the followers of John and the followers of Jesus. Matthew wants to make it very clear that true disciples of John should also be disciples of Jesus, since John himself was a disciple of Jesus and regarded his ministry as inferior to the ministry of Jesus. Finally references to “a winnowing fan, fire and an axe”, speak of a coming judgment when the truly converted will be separated from the unconverted. As we read this reading, we are reminded that we too are called to repent as a way of preparing our hearts for the coming of the Lord.

FAITH SHARING QUESTIONS

1. What verse or image spoke to you most? Why?
2. Which gift of the Holy Spirit mentioned in the first reading do you need the most at this time? Why?
3. When it comes to “living in harmony” with others (second reading), what one or more obstacles do you run into?
4. Most of us are spiritually blind to our real need to do the serious work of repentance. Why? Why is it so difficult for most people to spend real time in the desert where God may show us what needs changing in our lives?

RESPONDING TO THE WORD

Name one way you can act on today’s reading. Suggestions: Spend some serious time asking the Holy Spirit to help you to see what attitudes or behaviors need changing in your life. If there is some relationship in your life that needs to be restored to peace, pray about what steps you can take to make this happen.

CONCLUDE WITH PRAYERS OF PETITION AND INTERCESSION

Pray for the grace of true repentance. Pray for the grace to make a good confession this Advent Season. ©

THIRD SUNDAY IN ADVENT

December 16, 2007 A

Open with a prayer: God of our Lord Jesus Christ, creation rejoices in the hope of the Savior's coming and looks forward with longing to his return at the end of time. Prepare our hearts for our Lord's coming and remove all that hinders us from feeling the joy and hope, which his presence will bestow. Be with us now, Lord as we gather to share our lives and your holy Word. Amen.

Sharing of life question: What are you most and least grateful for this week?

Facilitator reads focus statement: In the first reading, Isaiah offers hope to weak and frightened Israelites living in exile. In the second reading, James also offers hope to people awaiting the Second Coming of the Lord. The imprisoned John the Baptist is confused about the identity of Jesus.

If you have not read the commentary prior to the meeting, consider reading it before or after you read the scripture readings.

FIRST READING: Isaiah 35:1-6, 10

In this reading, the people of Israel are in exile because of their infidelity to their covenant with God. But God's prophet now announces Good News; their time of exile is about to end. God is coming to *liberate* his broken-hearted people. Just as Moses led their ancestors through the desert to the Promised Land, God will lead his people through the desert and back to the Promised Land. But this journey through the desert will not be rigorous and difficult like their first journey. Their way will be eased by the gracious hand of God. Nature will be transformed. Oasis would spring up to refresh them and where once brambles and thorns had made travel difficult, now flowers and beautiful foliage would decorate their path. Also, during their journey the frightened would become bold, the feeble would gain strength and the blind, the lame and deaf would experience liberation.

RESPONSORIAL PSALM 146

This psalm expresses God's concern for the disenfranchised and poor.

SECOND READING: James 5:7-10

In our second reading, James counsels the Christian community to practice patience. (People were becoming impatient because Jesus' return or Second Coming was being delayed and because of conflicts in the community.) James uses the image of a farmer to make his point. Just as a farmer is subject to the elements of nature and the weather and must cooperate with them, so must the Christian practice patience with God's timing and ways. James also urges his readers to take as models the prophets who suffered much as they spoke the word of God.

GOSPEL: Matthew 11:2-11

Last week, we encountered John out in the desert; today we meet him in prison – an experience that must have been awful for a man who loved the wilderness. He is in jail because he told Herod that it was wrong for him to marry his brother's wife. The gospel has two parts: the first speaks about John's doubts and in the second, Jesus clarifies John's role in the plan of salvation.

It would seem that John's followers have been reporting to him about the ministry of Jesus, his healings and his befriending of sinners. John is confused because Jesus is not turning out to be the type of Messiah that he announced. John, it seems, was looking for more of a forceful and authoritative expression of power. Where were the axe, the winnowing fan and fire spoken about last Sunday? John wonders if Jesus is the One who is to come or should he look for another? Jesus' response is indirect. Contrary to popular expectations, Jesus was not going to be a militaristic Messiah who would drive out the Romans nor would he be a "hell-fire and damnation" Messiah. Rather, he would fulfill the vision of the Messiah described by Isaiah in today's first reading. He would perform healing and preach mercy. "Blest are they who would find not scandal or stumbling block in Jesus and his ministry." These words are intended to challenge John and his followers to adjust their perception of the Messiah and how God would choose to save the world.

Having clarified his own role and mission, Jesus went on to clarify John's role in history. John is not reed swaying in the wind like the unprincipled jailer, Herod. John's role is more than any of the great prophets. His role is to announce the coming

of the Messiah and to prepare people for his coming. Yet the least in the New Kingdom that Jesus is inaugurating is *greater* than John because they will experience the great outpouring of the Holy Spirit, which will occur after John had died.

FAITH SHARING QUESTIONS

1. What verse or image spoke to you most? Why?
2. The first reading speaks about “frightened hearts”. At times, all of us feel scared and fragile. What helps you to make it through such times?
3. James speaks about “patient waiting”. Can you recall a time when you had to patiently wait for God? How did you cope with that? Are you a patient person?
4. John was confused about Jesus’ identity because of his miracles and works of mercy. Is there anything about God’s ways that confuses you?

RESPONDING TO THE WORD

Name one way you can act on today’s readings? Suggestions: Be open to the unexpected ways of God and consider attending your parish’s Penance Service.

CONCLUDE WITH PRAYERS OF PETITION AND INTERCESSION

Pray for the grace to recognize the surprising ways of God. Pray that Catholics who have not received the Sacrament of Reconciliation in a long time will be moved to do so this Advent season. ©

FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT

December 23, 2007 A

Open with a prayer: *Father all-powerful God, your eternal Word took flesh on earth when the Virgin Mary placed her life at the service of your plan. Lift our minds in watchful hope to hear the voice, which announces his glory, and open our minds to receive the Spirit who prepares us for his coming.*

Sharing of life question: What do you like most and least about Christmas personally and liturgically?

Facilitator reads focus statement: All three readings point to the *identity* of Jesus; he is the sign of God's presence with his people (first reading), he is true God and true man, (second reading) and he is the Son of God who has come to save us (gospel)

If you have not read the commentary prior to the meeting, consider reading it before or after you read the scripture readings.

FIRST READING: Isaiah 7:10-14

In these verses, King Ahaz finds himself in a bad place. He is about to be attacked by neighboring armies. To defend his kingdom, he plans to enter into an alliance with other pagan rulers. Isaiah, the local prophet, tells him that to do this would be an act of distrust in God with whom his people have a covenant relationship.

Today's verses open with God telling Ahaz to "ask for a sign" so that God can show him that he is present with him. Ahaz says that he doesn't want to tempt the Lord. But commentators tell us that the real reason he refuses the Lord's offer is that he doesn't want to place his trust in God.

Then Isaiah says that despite Ahaz's attitude, God will give him a son: "a virgin will conceive a child and give him the name Emmanuel (God-with-us). The name is significant because it indicates that God will continue the Davidic dynasty and not allow it to be wiped out by hostile neighbors. While Isaiah was, most likely, referring to the birth of Ahaz's son, early Christians saw the prophecy as pointing to the virgin birth of Jesus.

RESPONSORIAL PSALM 24

This psalm is a hymn of praise to God the creator and savior. There is a reference to cultic worthiness: only the person with a clean heart and upright conscience can participate in the worship of the Lord.

SECOND READING: Romans 1:1-7

As Paul begins his letter to the Romans, he reminds them that Jesus is both *human* and *divine*. Jesus is "descended from David according to the flesh, but established as the Son of God in power according to

the Spirit. . . Paul also reminds his readers of the "obedient faith" or call to holiness to which all disciples of Jesus are called.

GOSPEL: Matthew 1:18-24

In *Matthew's* infancy narrative, Joseph, not Mary, receives the limelight. This is so because Matthew is writing for a Jewish audience and he wants to show them that Jesus is a true descendent of Abraham and David. Joseph is Jesus' link to the house of David. Matthew wants to show that Jesus, even though he did not have a human father, is a Son of David while not ignoring Jesus' divine origin. Jesus' divine origin is shown in his virginal conception by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Also, in this Gospel, Matthew wishes to portray Joseph as a "righteous man," as a law-abiding man who blends submission to the law with compassion for others. This is done by telling us that Joseph intended to divorce Mary - not to do so would be to tolerate evil in his midst (the assumption here is, of course, that Mary had committed fornication). By being willing to divorce Mary, Joseph showed that he loved God more than he loved Mary whom he also loved with all his heart. But Joseph planned to divorce Mary "quietly", thus not humiliating her. If Joseph had gone public, Mary could have been stoned to death for her assumed act of infidelity (see Deut 22:21). This shows that Joseph's sense of justice is tempered with mercy.

Then Matthew tells us how Joseph's intentions were "vetoed" by God's intervention. An angel in a dream tells Joseph to take Mary into his home because the baby has been conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit. Joseph obeys. The neighbors may be shocked. After all, they did not know the circumstances of Jesus' conception. Here again,

Joseph shows himself to be a righteous man. The righteous person is one who is obedient to God's revelation no matter how scandalous it may seem to others.

By giving Jesus two names, Matthew is revealing to his audience something about Jesus' *identity* and mission. The name *Jesus* means "One who saves". Jesus' mission was to bring salvation. Jesus is also called *Emmanuel*, i.e., "God is with us." In Jesus, God is with us in the flesh. For Matthew, the birth of Jesus is the fruition of God's promise through the ages to *be with* and to *save* his people.

By quoting the Isaian passage, Matthew is telling his audience that Jesus is the fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecies concerning the Messiah. He comes from *God* and from *Israel*.

FAITH SHARING QUESTIONS

1. What verse or image spoke to you most today? Why?
2. In the first reading, Ahaz in a difficult situation is accused of not trusting in God. Can you think of a time when you were in a difficult situation? Were you able to place your trust in God, or did you feel that everything depended on you?
3. In the second reading, Paul speaks about "obedient faith" and our "call to holiness". What do these important phrases mean to you? What do they ask of you? To what extent does your "ordinary Catholic" believe that his baptism is also a call to live a holy life?
4. Joseph never speaks in the Bible. How does his silent witness speak to you?

RESPONDING TO THE WORD

Name one way you can act on today's readings? Suggestions: Think and pray about your call to trust God in all things, your call to a life of obedient faith and your call to live a holy life. Look for ways to act holy by reaching out to someone who is alone and lonely this season.

CONCLUDE WITH PRAYERS OF PETITION AND INTERCESSION

Pray for the grace to take seriously your call to live a holy life. Pray for all who are traveling. Pray for preachers of the word and that our liturgies may touch the hearts of non-church going Catholics who will come to church this Christmas. ©

HOLY FAMILY OF JESUS, MARY, AND JOSEPH

December 30, 2007 A

Open with a prayer: *Jesus, God and man, you were born into a human family to model for us the sanctity of family life. Teach us and empower us to love our families as you love them. Show us how to reverence and respect each other, especially the aged and vulnerable members of our family. Be with us now as we gather to break open your Word. Amen.*

Sharing of life question: What do you love most and least about your family?

Facilitator reads focus statement: On this feast of the Holy Family, the readings speak to us about relationships within families. Sirach stresses the Lord's command to "honor thy father and mother." Paul focuses on the need for children to be obedient to parents and the responsibilities of parents towards children. Matthew highlights Joseph's obedience to God's commands pertaining to Jesus and his care for Jesus' mother.

If you have not read the commentary prior to the meeting, consider reading it before or after you read the scripture readings.

FIRST READING: Sirach 3:2-7, 12-14

In line with a strong Israelite tradition, Sirach places a high priority on respect for one's parents, especially in their older years. Sirach also lists the rewards that come with such respectful conduct: one atones for one's sins, is blessed with offspring, and is assured an answer to prayer and a long life.

RESPONSORIAL PSALM 128

This psalm, which speaks about the fear of the Lord, makes reference to the blessing of a worthy wife, which, in turn, is a blessing to a whole family.

SECOND READING: COLOSSIANS 3:12-21

In baptism, Christians *clothed* themselves in Christ. Paul now urges his readers to clothe themselves with the virtues that befit a follower of Christ: forgiveness, kindness, patience, love, etc. Then Paul exhorts his readers to be grateful, to sing and do whatever they do for the glory of God. According to the cultural outlook of the time, Paul urges wives to be submissive to their husbands. If living today, Paul would most likely encourage spouses to be submissive to each other.

GOSPEL: Matthew 2:13-15, 19-23

Matthew's gospel was written primarily for Jewish people who had become Christians. The community also included some Gentile converts. In his gospel, Matthew takes pains to portray Jesus as a true Israelite and in this story, as a new Moses. Jesus' journey to Egypt is reminiscent of Israel's going down to Egypt and just as Moses escaped from Egypt, so did Jesus escape from violence and from

Egypt. When Jesus returned he came back to Nazareth in Galilee where there were many Gentiles. Jesus' mission is not just to the Israelites, but also to the Gentiles. Today's story is also a beautiful example of a father who is most *obedient to God*. When God speaks and instructs, Joseph responds with promptness.

FAITH SHARING QUESTIONS

1. What verse spoke to you the most? Why?
2. The first reading speaks glowingly of the rewards that come to those who care for their parents, especially for elderly parents. Living out this reading becomes a big challenge when one has a poor relationship with one's parents. Any suggestions for adult children in this situation?
3. In the second reading, Paul names several virtues that have the power to strengthen a marriage or family. In your experience what are the keys to a strong marriage (if single a strong friendship) and family?
4. Scripture records no spoken words of Joseph. How does his silent witness speak to us?
5. What do families today need to do to become *holy* families?

RESPONDING TO GOD'S WORD

Name one way that you can act on these readings. Suggestions: If there is a family member with whom you are distant, call or write to him/her. Pray often for your family if you do not already do so. Reach out to a neighbor who lives alone and has very few friends.

**CONCLUDE WITH PRAYERS OF PETITION
AND INTERCESSION**

Pray for all families, including your parish family and your Small Christian Community family. Pray for families who are hurting for whatever reason. Pray for elderly parents who are abandoned by their children and for children who have been abandoned by their father or mother or both. ©

EPIPHANY OF THE LORD

January 6, 2008 A

Open with a prayer: *O light of Lights, you showed forth the light of God's love to all nations. In your coming, God's saving love is revealed from east to west. You have made us co-heirs and shares in the promise of salvation. Illuminate our minds and hearts with your love. May we, as the Magi, always seek and search for you. Enlighten us as we contemplate your Word today. We pray in your light and in your love. Amen.*

Sharing of life question: What was the highlight of this past year? What do you hope for in the coming year?

Facilitator reads focus statement: Epiphany means manifestation. On this Sunday, the Church invites us to celebrate God's universal plan to save *all* people, Gentiles as well as Jews.

If you have not read the commentary prior to the meeting, consider reading it before or after you read the scripture readings.

FIRST READING: Isaiah 60:1-6

This reading begins by announcing that Jerusalem's days of darkness are over (a reference to Israel's time in exile). God is about to bring a New Dawn to Israel. So great will be the new light on Jerusalem be, that all the Nations (a reference to the Gentiles) will be drawn to the city bearing all kinds of gifts. This prophecy will be fulfilled when Jesus invites all people to come into his light. The Magi are the first Gentiles to respond to Jesus' invitation.

PSALM 72

"Lord, every nation on earth will adore you", speaks of God's universal plan to save all people, thereby connecting this psalm to the overall theme of this Sunday's readings.

SECOND READING: Ephesians 3:2-3, 5-6

In these verses, Paul speaks about his special mission to bring the Good News to the Gentiles – thus connecting this reading with the general theme of the day. The "secret plan" of God now revealed by Jesus to Paul and the Apostles is the total equality of Jews and Gentiles in God's plan of salvation.

GOSPEL: Matthew 2:1-12

The Gospel is the fulfillment of the first reading, which speaks of all the nations streaming to Jerusalem bearing gifts for the new King. The Magi represent the non-Jewish world, which are seekers of God in their own way. The Magi's *journey* to Bethlehem in search of the new King is symbolic of the journey all seekers must take. So, Epiphany is not only a feast in which we celebrate God's

manifestation of himself to the Gentile world, but it also celebrates our movement toward God.

When Matthew was writing his Gospel in 80 A.D., his own people had almost totally *rejected* Jesus and large groups of Gentiles were *accepting* him. This rejection/acceptance dynamic is present in today's Gospel. Herod's plot to kill Jesus symbolizes Israel's leaders' rejection of him, and the Magi's acceptance of him symbolizes the Gentiles' movement toward Jesus. This rejection/acceptance dynamic will be played out many times in Matthew's Gospel. The Pharisees will close their hearts to Jesus and the Gentiles will open their hearts to him.

FAITH SHARING QUESTIONS

1. What verse spoke to you most and why?
2. In the first reading we hear these words: "See darkness covers the earth". What forms of darkness covers the earth today? What can we do to combat them?
3. In the second reading, Paul speaks about a "*stewardship of God's grace that was given to me for your benefit.*" Christian stewardship states that all that we are and have comes to us as blessing from our loving God - blessings that are to be nurtured and shared generously with others for the building up of God's Kingdom. To what extent have you bought into the biblical concept of stewardship?
4. In the gospel, the Magi are on a search for the new born king. At this time in your life, what are you searching for?

RESPONDING TO THE WORD

Name one way you can act on this Sunday's readings. Suggestions: Infuse light into places of darkness. Be a more conscious steward of God's blessings. Be more aware of what you are searching for.

REFLECTION

*When the song
of the angels is stilled
When the star
in the sky is gone
When the kings and princes
are home
When shepherds are back
with their flocks
The work of Christmas begins:
To find the lost
To heal the broken
To feed the hungry
To release the captives
To rebuild nations
To bring peace among peoples
To make music in the heart.*

-Howard Thurman

CONCLUDE WITH PRAYERS OF PETITION AND INTERCESSION

Pray for all who do not know Christ, and that we who say we know him, may practice his teachings more fully. ©

THE BAPTISM OF THE LORD

January 13, 2008 A

Open with a prayer: *God our Creator, you offered your servant Jesus as savior to all humankind. His coming among us opened our eyes to the light of justice, peace and salvation. By the River Jordan you anointed Jesus to carry out his mission; anoint us now with your Holy Spirit so that we can hear the word you are speaking to us. This we pray through Christ Our Lord. Amen.*

Sharing of life questions: Who were/are your godparents? Did/do you have a special or spiritual relationship with them? Are you a godparent? If so, have you been able to share your faith with your godchild?

Facilitator reads focus statement: This Sunday brings us to the end of the Christmas season. It is a bridge between the Christmas season and the beginning of Ordinary Time - this Sunday is another Epiphany story – manifesting Jesus as the servant of God who will save his people from the slavery of sin.

If you have not read the commentary prior to the meeting, consider reading it before or after you read the scripture readings.

FIRST READING: Isaiah 42:1-4, 6-7

This reading is the first of four Isaian poems that speak of a mysterious suffering servant who will be God's instrument in bringing salvation and justice to our world. When Isaiah wrote these poems he was not thinking about a future Messiah, named Jesus. More likely he was thinking of a transformed and purified Israel who would be God's instrument among the nations. After the death and resurrection of Jesus, the first Christians saw in these poems a description of Jesus – the suffering servant par excellence – the one who through his suffering, death and resurrection brought salvation and light to a dark world. Modest, gentle and compassionate, this servant did not fit the popular image of a militaristic leader who would lead Israel to a military victory over her aggressors. This gentle servant would be empowered by God to carry out his mission.

The reading especially notes that the servant would “bring forth justice to the nations”. Biblical justice has to do with “right relationship” with one's God and neighbor. In and through baptism each of us is called to imitate the servant spoken about in this reading. We have in Jesus and many of the saints, especially those who were advocates for the poor great models which we, empowered by the Holy Spirit can seek to imitate.

RESPONSORIAL PSALM 29

“The voice of the Lord over the waters” connects this psalm to the Baptism of Jesus.

SECOND READING: Acts 10:34-38

This reading is an excerpt from Peter's address to the household of Cornelius, a Roman centurion and Gentile. Because he opened his heart to the message of Jesus, he is saved. The key point in this reading is that salvation is available to all who open their hearts to God. “God shows no partiality.”

GOSPEL: Matthew 3:13-17

In this gospel, Jesus comes to the River Jordan to be baptized by John. John has a problem with Jesus' request because his baptism was for sinners – something Jesus was not. Yet, Jesus insists that John baptize him “to fulfill all righteousness” (or plan). Remember that Matthew is writing mainly to a Jewish Christian community. He is anxious to show them that Jesus is the fulfillment of all Old Testament prophecies concerning the Messiah. The “sky opening”, the “Spirit of God descending” and “a voice from the heavens” all resonate with messianic prophecies that are fulfilled in Jesus. Many scholars also believe that Jesus insisted on receiving a “sinner's baptism” as a way to identify himself with sinful humanity. In his incarnation, Jesus took upon himself the sins of the world. Finally, many scholars believe that it was during his baptism experience that Jesus became aware of the *type* of messiah that he was to become – namely a suffering messiah – like the one described in Isaiah 53 from which the first reading on Good Friday is taken.

FAITH SHARING QUESTIONS

1. What verse or image spoke to you most and why?
2. In and through our baptism, each of us is called to be a servant of the Lord a servant of God's people. How do you seek to live out this call in your life?
3. In the second reading, Luke, the author of Acts, writes: "In truth, I see that God shows no partiality. Rather, in every nation whoever fears him and acts uprightly is acceptable to him." Do you think that this means that Muslims and other non-Christians will be saved?
4. What does your baptism mean to you? Do you have a sense of being empowered by the Holy Spirit to live a Christian life?

RESPONDING TO THE WORD

Name one way you can act on this Sunday's readings. Suggestions: Be more aware of your baptismal call to be the presence of Christ in our world and how you have received the power of the Holy Spirit to help you live out this call.

CONCLUDE WITH PRAYERS OF PETITION AND INTERCESSION

Pray especially for all who are preparing for baptism. Pray for all Catholics who have little or no sense of what it means to be 'baptized in Christ'. ©