



3rd Week of Advent 15 December 2024

Reflection by Mgr Daniel McHugh

“Rejoice in the Lord always.....Indeed the Lord is at hand” [Philippians 4:4/5]

As I am preparing this Reflection for the 3rd Week of Lent, I have noted a post from Classic FM where Anne Marie Minhall responds to a request for Bryn Terfel’s ‘Stille, Stille, Stille’, words describing the peace of the infant Jesus and his mother as the baby is sung to sleep. Anne Marie describes it as the Christmas Carol she loves to stop and listen to on Christmas Eve. She says it is important to stop and breathe and enjoy what Christmas brings. For many of us that is something we experience when we visit the Crib at Christmas to reflect quietly in prayer on the Christ child who came into this world for us.

On a brief visit to Rome just last week I went into the Church of Sant’Andrea, not far from the English College where I lived as a student for the priesthood. In Sant’Andrea I was met by an amazing Exhibition of Cribs from different parts of the world, many reflecting the culture of the countries from which they came. One of my favourites was a very simple Crib from Austria depicting Mary seated with the child Jesus in her arms; a sheep in the foreground; 2 angels high above; and a golden star pointing to where the Saviour lay; domestic pots were placed nearby. Italy is famous for its cribs and I remember well after Christmas as a student going to visit the Churches to see the Cribs: Santa Maria in Aracoeli (the Altar of Heaven) had a spectacular Crib depicting so much of human life with the Infant Jesus at the centre. The words on one of the banners in the exhibition at Sant’Andrea sum up the Incarnation “E Nato per Noi”- “He was born for us”. The subtitle is *Lo sguardo di Dio e Negli occhi di Gesù* “God looks on us with the eyes of Jesus”. The Cribs that are now being set up in our churches and schools speak to us of the fulfilment of the words of the Prophet Zephaniah in the first reading for the 3rd Sunday of Advent: “The Lord, is in your midst; you shall never again fear evil....the Lord God is in your midst, a mighty one who will save.....he will quiet you with his love.” Another banner in Sant’Andrea reads “Il Presepio é Pace”, the Crib is Peace. Underneath are the words from Pope St John Paul II, a Prayer for Peace:

“Dry, Child Jesus,
The Tears of children!
Caress the sick and the cold!
Drive men to lay down their arms
and to hug one another in a universal
embrace of peace”

Monsignor Daniel McHugh

Co-ordinator for Ethnic Chaplaincies in the Archdiocese



This prayer leads us beyond the happiness, the rejoicing, at the coming of Jesus that we all experience before the crib, to think, to pray for others, for those who are suffering in the world in which we live. John the Baptist in the Gospel passage for the third Sunday urges us to do this too. John's focus is on preparing for the coming of Jesus. Ernest Ferlita SJ in his commentary says the message of John is that we should "remove those things that hinder our receiving him with joy". What must we do the people ask?" Ferlita says: "There are two things to note in John's answer. First he answers in terms of one's state in life. Secondly, he mentions things that have social repercussions, things that cause sadness in others."

"If we were to ask him, what must we do? He would say first, look at your state in life. Are you married? Or are you single? Are you a student? A labourer? A professional of some sort? A priest? In reply to a question for spiritual counsel, St Claude La Colombière the spiritual director to St Margaret Mary (we celebrate the 350th anniversary of her apparitions of the Sacred Heart this year and next) has this to say: "It would in fact be something beautiful in the world if each one performed the duties of his state. But that is what is most neglected even by devout people, and sometimes them more than others." Ferlita continues: "What acts of yours have social repercussions that cause sadness in others? Let the chaff fly, so that the wheat may come clear, the wheat of ourselves, our souls, our hearts and minds."

I must admit John the Baptist presents us with an uncomfortable challenge as we make our way to the Crib to rejoice once more at the coming of Jesus. Philip Kosloski draws our attention to the words of Pope Benedict XVI in a homily at the First Vespers of Advent where he says Jesus wants to come again into the world "through us": "This is the voice of the Lord who wants to enter our epoch, he wants to enter human life through us. He also seeks a living dwelling place in our lives. This is the coming of the Lord. Let us once again learn this in the season of Advent: the Lord can also come among us."

It was inspiring to witness on TV the reopening of Notre Dame in Paris after the devastating fire last weekend. I noted particularly the words of the Chief Architect who revealed his devotion to Our Lady saying he believes she gave him strength to complete the restoration of the French Cathedral after it was almost completely destroyed in the fire of 2019. Philippe Villeneuve was speaking to Colin Flynn, the Vatican correspondent for EWTN News: "I have a particular devotion to Our Lady. And at the risk of sounding totally crazy or like Joan of Arc, I never stopped feeling support from up there."

With the prayers of Our Blessed Mother we can take up the challenge of John "to clear his threshing floor and to gather wheat into his barn."

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Co-ordinator for Ethnic Chaplaincies in the Archdiocese