

Meditations: 24 December

Some reflections that can assist our prayer as we await the Child Jesus' arrival at Christmas.

- Giving thanks for the arrival of Jesus
- God's grace has appeared to us
- The waiting is over

BLESSED BE THE LORD GOD of Israel, for he has visited and redeemed his people (Lk 1:67). These are Zechariah's first words after nine months without being able to speak. His hymn could be summed up as:

How good God is! With this Gospel, the Church wants the time of waiting in Advent to come to an end. This holy man did not view these months as a punishment. On the contrary, he is grateful for what he has been given, for the wonderful opportunity to prepare himself adequately for what his son John is going to announce. It was a time similar to Advent, which God once again has offered to us. We may have made better or worse use of these days of preparation. In any case, it will do us a lot of good to thank God for what He has done in our soul, even if it seems to us to be a humble stable. God has prepared a very special place there for his Son.

We may experience what perhaps happened to one of the shepherds on Christmas Eve: “A beautiful legend tells us that when Jesus was born, the shepherds ran to the grotto bearing many gifts. Each one brought what

he had: some, the fruits of their labour; others, something of value. But while all the shepherds made a generous effort to bring the best, there was one shepherd who had nothing. He was very poor, he had nothing to offer. And while the others competed to present their gifts, he stood back in shame. At a certain moment, Saint Joseph and the Virgin Mary found it difficult to receive the many gifts, especially Mary, who had to hold the child in her arms. Then, seeing the shepherd with empty hands, she asked him to come closer. And she put Jesus in his hands. The shepherd, taking him, realised that he had received what he did not deserve, that he was holding in his arms the greatest gift in history. He looked at his hands, and those hands that had always seemed empty to him had become God's cradle. He felt loved and, overcoming his shame, he began to show Jesus to others, because he

could not just keep the gift of gifts for himself.”^[1]

“IF YOUR HANDS SEEM EMPTY, if you think your heart is poor in love, this night is for you. *The grace of God has appeared*, to shine forth in your life. Accept it and the light of

Christmas will shine forth in you.”^[2]

Whatever our personal perception of the fruits of our struggle and apostolate, we know that in reality our hands are not empty. Saint Josemaría suggested that we go to Bethlehem with something very precious: “In that cold, lonely place, with his Mother and Saint Joseph, what Jesus wants, what will give him warmth, is our heart.”^[3]

Perhaps we would feel better if we had arrived with our hands full of good works, of holiness, of affection for everyone around us. But reality often falls short of our desires. It may be that in our lives, full of

commitments and unfinished business, time has gone by too quickly. No matter: we can still approach the stable today and be warmly welcomed. We will discover that Our Lady and Saint Joseph are waiting for us, and are overjoyed to have us there now with them.

Salvation is already here. A few hours separate us from it, but joy begins to flood our hearts. Saint Bernard confirms us in our most ambitious desires: “Now, therefore, our peace is not promised, but given; it is not deferred, but granted; it is not prophesied, but made a reality. The Father has sent to earth a ‘satchel’ filled with mercy; a satchel, we could say, that will be torn open in the Passion, so that the price of our ransom it contains may pour out; a satchel that, though small, is already completely full. Indeed, a Child has been given to us, but in this

Child dwells all the fullness of the divinity.”^[4]—

THE WORDS OF ZECHARIAH are the last prophecy before our salvation is finally fulfilled. God’s heart has been moved by the darkness in which we live and He comes to save us, not to judge whether we are worthy to receive Him. With this just and pious Israelite, we too want to experience the depths of divine mercy: *the tender mercy of our God, whereby the sunrise shall visit us from on high (Lk 1:78).*

We could miss out on this privilege if we are overcome by distractions, so easy to find in these final hours: “We live our lives amid worldly affairs and occupations that totally absorb us and are a great distance from the manger. In all kinds of ways, God has to prod us and reach out to us again and again, so that we can manage to escape from the muddle of our

thoughts and activities and discover the way that leads to him.”^[5] Let us travel this last stretch of the journey close to Our Lady, perhaps beside the donkey that is bringing her to Bethlehem.

As Saint John Paul II said, on this night God “enters history. He submits to the law of human flow. He closes the past: with him there ends the time of expectation, that is, the Old Covenant. He opens the future: the New Covenant of grace and reconciliation with God. He is the new ‘Beginning’ of the New Time.”^[6] We accompany Our Lady as she prepares the stable: the straw, the crib, the swaddling clothes... Mary places all her love there so that the Child does not miss anything. We would love to help provide these services and to see that, in a certain sense, both of them wanted to need us.

^[1] Pope Francis, Homily, 24 December 2019.

^[2] *Ibid.*

^[3] Saint Josemaría, “Pray Without Ceasing,” *In Dialogue with our Lord*, 75.

^[4] Saint Bernard, First Epiphany Sermon, 1-2.

^[5] Pope Benedict XVI, Homily, 24 December 2009.

^[6] Saint John Paul II, Homily, 1 January 1979.