

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Over the weeks of this holy season of Advent, the Scriptures have been broken open before us as we have been eyewitness to the unfolding drama of salvation history. We have been bound together in an intimate way with the fears and hopes, the aspirations and expectations of our forebears in faith: the people of Israel and the members of the early Christian communities. In what seems inexplicable, we are all much alike despite the chasm of centuries which separate us one from another. What binds us together is our human experience and human nature; blessed by God into being, now God comes to change us forever and for all time. Now God, in fulfilling a promise made to our ancient ancestors represented by Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, dwells among us in the flesh, in real time. The ancient waiting and anticipation draw to a close; the words of Isaiah now come literally to life: "...the virgin will conceive, and bear a son, and shall name him Emmanuel." Emmanuel, taken from the ancient Hebrew, means "God with us." Indeed he is, now even more intimately through the gift of His Son.

A few weeks ago I made reference to an Advent homily given by the late Father Walter J. Burghardt, S.J. at Holy Trinity Church in Georgetown, D.C. In framing the essence of the Season of Advent, Father Burghardt poses this searing insight: "Advent challenges you: Are you interested enough, do you dare, to listen to the answer given in the flesh of God's only Son, wrestle with it, and say yes to it even in darkness, live it even at great risk, and carry it to those who cry for it from untold calvaries?" On this fourth Sunday of Advent, it is surely worthy of our reflection and prayer to address how Advent has challenged us, clarified for us how deeply is Jesus present in our lives, been manifested in our thoughts and deeds. As in any challenge, it is not always easy to face those areas of life that need to be fortified and strengthened. Yet, the readings proclaimed these past weeks in a very stark way have pointed us in a direction of hope and recalibration, an opportunity to prepare ourselves for the most extravagant gift God has ever bestowed upon us: the gift of His only begotten Son. In this time wherein there is so much speculation and preoccupation for gift-giving, have we paid more than just fleeting attention to this most precious gift of all?

The discipleship expressed with such heroic humility by the apostle Paul and Joseph, father of our Lord, is a model for each one of us. St. Paul writes, "Through him we have received the grace of apostleship, to bring about the obedience of faith, for the sake of his name..." This discipleship has real meaning and implications for our lives. Paul utterly and completely surrendered himself for the Gospel; he faced daunting hardships and disappointments and yet never capitulated. Joseph himself faced confounding circumstances himself concerning the birth of Jesus; he, too, did not capitulate and, consoled by the words of the angel of the Lord, became a model husband and father. These circumstances or "crossroads moments" are not co-incidental; they help us to understand that the road to discipleship is not always an easy one to trod; yet, if we do, we too will draw more closely to the Messiah who will transform and revolutionize our lives as he did with St. Paul and Joseph.

Fr. Tom