




SAINTS IN

WAITING

*Reflections on the
Saints of Advent*



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ST MARYS CF10

2021



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Throughout Advent, there are lovely celebrations of the saints which permeate our preparations for Christmas and enrich our time of waiting upon God. Their lives help us to reflect on the coming of Christ into the world, particularly amidst the busyness that characterizes this time of year.

We take eight of those saints who are remembered in the Liturgical Calendar of the church during the beautiful season of Advent. They are embedded in the midst of the themes of preparation and waiting, and even of those age-old Advent themes of Heaven, Hell, Death and Judgement – words which cause some to shiver, until we get to the true heart of what they are actually saying to us.

Each reflection begins with some words sung at this time of year, whether from our rich treasure trove of Advent Hymns or the colourful collection of Christmas Hymns and Carols. There is also a Bible passage and a short meditation which may lead you in to your own personal prayer and reflections.

This gathering of men and women in the faith are good companions for Advent. They are the saints in our waiting. But perhaps, too, they offer an opportunity for us to reflect on our own lives in the hope that we too, having being inspired by them and filled with the same grace and Power from on High, may be saints in waiting.



30 November

St Andrew

Apostle

*"On Jordan's bank the Baptist's cry
announces that the Lord is nigh.
Awake and harken, for he brings
glad tidings of the King of kings!"*

(Charles Coffin, Tr John Chandler)

The voice of John the Baptist is bold. It is a strong voice which defines our Advent preparations as with passionate preaching he prepares the way of the Lord. He pulls down the mountains of our lives, straightens the winding paths, kicks up obstacles like dust, throws them aside like stones. It is a voice from the wilderness, a voice from the wild, which comes from the heart of a man tamed by God's grace.

It is a voice which Andrew has heard. He is, before he even meets Jesus, a disciple of the Baptist, and so his heart is ready for the One who is to come. When Jesus calls him at the lapping waves of Galilee, Andrew places the tools of his trade aside. He drops his nets and, empty handed, steps forward to follow Jesus. There is to be no going back.

Already John the Baptist is decreasing so that Jesus will increase, his disciples are dispersing in the direction of Jesus, the One to whom John pointed as 'The Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.' Jesus speaks in a language Andrew can understand, uses familiar words and images, transfers their skills, tells them they will fish for people, throwing the net far and wide. His brother, Peter, is alongside him, as they move on further along the beach where two other brothers are soon to be called from their boats.

In the years to come, after Pentecost, Andrew will put his skills to use, fishing for people, throwing the net far and wide, preaching around the shores of the Black Sea and throughout what is now Greece and Turkey.

The industry of fishing is, even today, one of the most dangerous. The storms which sweep across Galilee will later provide another episode of learning for the disciples, as they cower in fear of drowning while Jesus sleeps on, unperturbed.

Discipleship is dangerous too – for Andrew, at least. Time and time again, he had heard Jesus tell them that he was laying down his life for them. Time and time again, Jesus said ‘If you want to follow me, you must take up your cross and follow me.’ Andrew came to know what this meant. Literally. It is upon the now familiar X shaped cross that Andrew would be put to death at Patras in Greece.

Tradition tells us that Andrew requested to be crucified this way, because he deemed himself "unworthy to be crucified on the same type of cross as Jesus." Andrew, then, as the first to follow Jesus, having taken the preaching of John the Baptist to heart, is an ideal saint and companion to begin our Advent journey.

Bible Reading

As Jesus walked by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon who is called Peter and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea; for they were fishermen. And he said to them, "Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men. (Matthew 4:18-19, RSV)

Am I a saint in waiting?

Am I ready to drop the tools to which I cling,

the insecurities and strange passions,

the possessions which push me down,

the dreams which take me nowhere,

the ambitions which have stood still for so long,

and make me feel like nothing will change,

the hopes that always seem hopeless?

Do I have the faith to follow,

and a heart open enough to trust?

What does it take to be saint in waiting?



3 December

St Francis Xavier

Priest

*“Yet with the woes of sin and strife
The world has suffered long;
Beneath the angel-strain have rolled
Two thousand years of wrong;
And man, at war with man, hears not
The love-song which they bring;
O hush the noise, ye men of strife,
And hear the angels sing.”*

(It Came Upon a Midnight Clear, Edmund Sears)

“Glory to God in the highest and peace to all on earth,” is the angels’ message which fulfils our Advent waiting. It is a song which fills the skies above the hills surrounding Bethlehem, as shepherds watch their sheep by night. Darkness is dispelled and, taking the message to heart, the shepherds make haste to see all that has happened.

One of the saints with whom we begin the Advent season is St Francis Xavier whose own childhood was immersed not in peace but in war. Born in the Basque Kingdom of Navarre on April 7, 1506, his father was a finance minister to King John III. The youngest of his family, he grew up within the walls of a castle but Navarre was under attack by King Ferdinand of Aragon and Castile, who eventually conquered.

His future friend and protégé, too, St Ignatius of Loyola, whose Society of Jesus (The Jesuits) he was to join, also had experience of war, fighting as he did in various battles and arriving unscathed until the last.

Injured by a cannonball which broke one leg and badly mangled the other, he almost died. Whilst recuperating he immersed himself in books, particularly in the lives of the saints and of Christ. There, marked with his war wounds, his heart was turned from battle to a desire to serve Christ, and Christ alone.

As an adult, far away from the castle walls which sheltered his life, Francis Xavier eventually became a priest, taking a vow of chastity, poverty and obedience. As a member of the Jesuits, he travelled far and wide, preaching the gospel in India, Borneo, Indonesia and Japan. He died of fever on Shangchuan Island in 1552 while travelling to China.

As we anticipate the angels' message at Christmas of peace to all on earth, we pause with this man and his boyhood memory of war.

Armed with the gospel of Christ, he travelled the world to proclaim the good news. *"Man, at war with man, hears not the love-song which they bring,"* we often sing at Christmas in the hymn, *It came upon a midnight clear.* Today, our world still experiences the wounds of war, and we are so aware of those who cower in darkness, the sky lit up not by angels but by the fire of war and the sound of gunfire.

'O hush the noise, ye men of strife, and hear the angels sing.'

Bible Reading

Jesus said to them, "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to the whole creation. He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned. So then the Lord Jesus, after he had spoken to them, was taken up into heaven, and sat down at the right hand of God. And they went forth and preached everywhere, while the Lord worked with them and confirmed the message by the signs that attended it." (*Mark 15:15-16; 19-20, RSV*)

Where are the saints in waiting?

The ones whose bravery is beyond me,

whose courage collapses kingdoms built on hatred,

The holy lives, the humble hearted,

The prophetic passions of a solitary soul,

The outspoken and the silent ones

whose voices make evil cry.

Where are the ones who unsettle the church,

disturb the ones who wish not to be disrupted,

The ones who pray in hushed tones,

In silent spaces unseen, unheard by us.

Lord, show us the saints in waiting.



6 December

St Nicholas

Bishop

*And thro' all his wondrous childhood
he would honour and obey,
love and watch the lowly maiden
in whose gentle arms he lay:
Christian children all must be
mild, obedient, good as he.*

(Once in Royal David's City, C.F. Alexander)

Christmas brings so many financial worries. Some families struggle to keep up with the pressure of a consumerist world, and many will carry debt deep into the new year. This may be your situation or perhaps you know of someone who is struggling or for whom pressures are building at this time of year.

Characterising the lives of so many saints is a love and concern for the poor. Indeed, many embrace poverty voluntarily, drawing themselves even closer to those who are poor through whatever problems have come their way or been forced upon them.

St Nicholas is a saint who is embedded in our Christmas celebrations although it can often be difficult to recognize him beneath the cotton wool beards and tall tales of elves and reindeers dashing through the snow.

A bishop in what is now modern-day Turkey, Nicholas had a love and concern for the poor and for children, and there are many stories told of his generosity towards them which on many occasions literally saved

their lives or even, in one case of a poor boy pickled in a barrel waiting for a butcher to do his bloody work, restored to life.

The gifts Nicholas often gave were small compared to what we are often given and receive or desire at Christmas. Perhaps, at times, we overlook the ordinary miracles of life in a world that always seeks more.

In a book that tells the story of a mother whose child has suffered a devastating brain injury, Nia Wyn Jones, writes this: 'As we pass the running children who hold up their heads so easily, I realise miracles are so common place we barely recognise them anymore, and near the circles of mothers anxiously comparing milestones at the school gates, I see how we live in a time where normal is never enough, and we are never full.' (*Blue Sky July*)

Yes, Saint Nicholas, Santa Claus, deserves his place in our Advent preparations, for he expresses kindness and gentleness, care and concern in an often-harsh world of poverty and injustice.

It is a world transformed by the coming of Christ into the world who raises the lowly, feeds the hungry, and pulls princes from their thrones, and through his simple gifts can learn to be satisfied with the gifts we have been given, and to rejoice in the miracles that, perhaps are so common place, we barely recognise them.

Bible Reading

The Lord appointed seventy others and sent them on ahead of him in pairs to every town and place where he himself intended to go. He said to them, "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest. Go on your way. See, I am sending you out like lambs into the midst of wolves. Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals; and greet no one on the road. Whatever house you enter, first say, 'Peace to this house!' And if anyone is there who shares in peace, your peace will rest on that person." (Luke 10:1-7, NRSV)

Who can be a saint in waiting?

Can it be the one who is overlooked,

the dismissed and disregarded,

the one who is bad mouthed,

the one of disrepute?

Whose face doesn't fit,

Whose name isn't right?

Whose age is too young, too old,

Their heart too nervous, too bold?

Who swims against the tide

whose voice is drowned out

by more important people



7 December

Saint Ambrose

Bishop, Doctor

*“Hills of the North, rejoice,
river and mountain-spring,
hark to the advent voice;
valley and lowland, sing.
Christ comes in righteousness and love,
he brings salvation from above.”*

(NEH, based on C.E. Oakley)

At the coldest and darkest time of the year, the winter can be a dangerous time. Perhaps past generations experienced this more acutely but, even in our own times, we know the dangers of winter sickness, and the difficulty that some people experience to heat their homes in an affordable way, with the elderly often most acutely effected.

Climate change, of course, has made our seasons even more unsteady, and we are becoming more accustomed to extreme weather, from forest fires to floods, all of which damages property and livelihood and, worst of all, endanger life.

Today, as we settle more deeply into our Advent preparations, St Ambrose speaks powerfully into the fears which surround us, and which battle against us on all sides and even from within.

Ambrose entered into the disagreement and disharmony caused by the appointment of a new bishop of Milan, to speak reconciliation and unity, and emerged as the figure of unity chosen to lead. He was baptised,

ordained priest and consecrated bishop in quick succession. He was a rather reluctant bishop, but his role of episcopacy was carried out with shepherd-like gentleness and overt courage.

St Ambrose was not afraid to challenge the Emperor and was uncompromising in his struggle against heretical teaching assuaging the church, and among those whose conversion he influenced was St Augustine.

“The Church of the Lord is built upon the rock of the apostles among so many dangers in the world; it therefore remains unmoved,” wrote St Ambrose. *“The Church’s foundation is unshakeable and firm against the assaults of the raging sea. Waves lash at the Church but do not shatter it.”*

“Although the elements of this world constantly beat upon the Church with crashing sounds, the Church possesses the safest harbour of salvation for all in distress.”

A constant message from God, and one which we hear a number of times at Advent and Christmas, is ‘Do not be afraid.’ Whatever causes you to fear for yourselves or your loved one, whatever your fear in the world, or whatever within the Church causes us anxiety, we can take refuge in the Lord and trust in him.

Bible Reading

I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away—and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep. I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep. I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd. (*John 10:11-16, NRSV*)

Is there a saint for my waiting?

Is there one who never seems to fear,

who can fight off the wolf-shaped dreams

which disturb my waking sleep?

One who can stand by me

When death is all I see?

Is there one who can patiently put up with the pain I create?

One who will smile when I smile,

laugh when I laugh,

share in the worries I have for the world

and wonder at the joy that I see?



8 December

Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary

*“O how blest that wondrous birthday,
when the Maid the curse retrieved,
brought to birth mankind's salvation,
by the Holy Ghost conceived,
and the Babe, the world's Redeemer,
in her loving arms received,
evermore and evermore.”*

*(Of the Father's heart begotten,
Latin, Pridentius, Tr R.F. Davies)*

In the writings of Cardinal Basil Hume is a short anecdote about a priest who at a funeral, climbs into the pulpit, looks at the congregation and in a solemn voice, begin, “I want to talk to you about judgement.’ But this is no fire and brimstone moment. He continues, “Judgement is whispering into the ear of a compassionate God, the story of your life.”

It is to be a storytelling that is open and honest, heartfelt and humble, acknowledging the hurts and harms that we have caused, and why we caused them. It's also a story that embraces a humbly honouring of the ways in which we may have managed to do something of what God had been asking us to do.

The traditional themes of Heaven and Hell, Death and Judgement may indeed be a mixed bag of things to contemplate, each word loaded with fear and sometimes misconceptions, but they are words which look to the future, and which can and should influence how we live today.

In Mary's chosenness, we see something of our calling too. Yes, her calling to be the Mother of Jesus Christ was in that sense entirely unique, but all are called to live in God's presence, for as we sing each Christmas in the hymn, O Little Town of Bethlehem: 'O holy child of Bethlehem, descend to us, we pray: cast out our sin and enter in, be born in us today.'

In today's feast of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary, we go right back to the small beginnings of Mary's life, even to her conception through which she was protected from the stain of sin by virtue of the cross of Christ which God foresaw.

The Angel's Annunciation in the backwater home of Mary in Nazareth is an intimate insight into the heart of Mary whose innocent questioning of how this can be leads to total submission to God's will.

She has taken to heart the message 'Do not be afraid' for God is with her. The Holy Spirit has overshadowed her, and the child that begins to grow within her body is holy.

The story of Mary's life, told humbly and honestly, will be one of total attentiveness to Jesus, whom she accepted in her heart even before he was conceived in her womb.

Bible Reading

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favoured one! The Lord is with you." But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." (Luke 1; 26-33, NRSV)

*She sits there, a saint in waiting,
confused and questioning,
Wondering how this can be?
She weighs up the words
which lay heavy in her heart,
receiving the Word,
unspoken, like a gentle voice growing within her,
echoing in her life.
She is so small, so little,
this unseen saint in waiting.*



9 and 12 December

Saint Juan Diego and Our Lady of Guadalupe

*“King of kings, yet born of Mary,
as of old on earth he stood,
Lord of heaven now incarnate
in the body and the blood,
he will give to all the faithful
his own self for heav’nly food.”*

(Liturgy of St James, Tr Gerard Moultrie)

Mary’s presence is closely felt during Advent and, particularly from December 17 as our active waiting turns into more eager preparations for the coming Christmas celebrations, she features more and more in our readings at Mass each day.

Mary is chosen even before she is born, and some years later when the angel greets her in her home at Nazareth, we witness her own sense of littleness. In humility and in an utterly trusting gesture of love towards God her Creator, she accepts God’s plan for her and the world.

She, who carried within her the person of Christ, gave birth to him, attended to his growing needs, followed him throughout his public ministry, stood at the foot of the cross, experienced the joy of the Resurrection, and prayed with the Apostles at Pentecost, knows what it means to be overshadowed by the Spirit of God. She knows what it means for God’s Spirit to move in her life, to change her life.

She, who knows what it means to be chosen and set apart for a significant role in God’s plan, chooses others.

Upon the cross, Jesus gives Mary and John to one another as mother and son and we, through that tender moment, take Mary as our mother too.

It was as Mother that, in 1531, she reveals herself to a poor peasant called Juan Diego. As he walked the long journey to Mass across Mount Tepeyac near Mexico City, he received the first of four vision which requested that a shrine be built on that spot.

The local bishop took some convincing, asking for a sign, to which Our Lady responded. She left a miraculous portrait of herself on St Juan Diego's mantle. The final vision he received were accompanied by the words gave the words which have becomes most well-known from the apparitions, "Am I not here, I who am your mother?"

Mary's love for Jesus was unconditional and, as Mother of the Church she loves us unconditionally too. She draws us closer to Jesus. She had learned, at a young age that Jesus wasn't just for her. Through our Advent and Christmas celebrations may we too draw others closer to Jesus, revealing his saving love for the world.

Bible Reading

Standing near the cross of Jesus were his mother, and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he said to his mother, "Woman, here is your son." Then he said to the disciple, "Here is your mother." And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home. (*John 19:25-27*)

Who are the saints in my waiting?

The ones who stand by me

when all around is falling apart?

The one who loves me

even when my heart is turned against myself?

The one who says nothing

but simply seems to be there

breathing hope into any situation?

The one who is patient

when life seems to be standing so still,

or whose shadow I feel on my shadow

when all I have done is managed to move on?

Who are the saints in my waiting?



13 December

St Lucy

Virgin, Martyr

*"How silently, how silently,
the wondrous gift is giv'n!
So God imparts to human hearts
the blessings of the heav'ns.
No ear may hear his coming,
but in this world of sin,
where meek souls will receive him still
the dear Christ enters in."*

(O, Little Town of Bethlehem, Phillips Brooks)

Perhaps, as you seek out Christmas gifts for others, you may have bought a calendar, so popular are they at time of year, and often filled with glossy pics of celebrities and footballers, cute kittens and irresistible puppies, country garden scenes and wildlife. Yes, people are looking forward to Christmas and many will, for many different reasons, be looking forward to a new year.

Not everyone will know that the calendar we keep these days is the Gregorian Calendar but at one time each day and month played into the hands of the Julian Calendar. During that time, today's feast day of St Lucy fell on December 21st, the shortest and darkest day of the year.

With a name which means 'light' and on the darkest day, there have emerged many light-filled traditions which celebrate her life, some of which have come from Scandinavian countries which, of course, experience even more darkness than we do, and where this day is celebrated as a festival of light.

Probably born in Syracuse (Sicily), legend tells us that Lucy was the daughter in a wealthy family. Brought up as a Christian during the time of the Emperor Diocletian, she received unwanted attention from a pagan who demanded she marry him, but she resisted his advances. So angered was he that arranged for her to be arrested, tortured and killed, one of the many Christians to be killed under the emperor at the time.

St Lucy was single-minded in her service of God and did not wish to be swayed in her devotions by someone who would lure her away from her Lord.

The occasion of her death is, of course, surrounded by injustice and terror and pain. But the witness she gave, the price she paid, the example she offers, brightens the darkness and, throughout the world, her name is associated with the coming of Christ into the world.

There are many distractions in our discipleship, things that can lure us away from our Lord, weaken our friendship, or topple our trust in him. Plunged into the darkness of the natural world, we are also aware of the darkness created by sin and strife, by dangers and difficulties. From within that darkness we see the light of Christ.

Bible Reading

Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord. For it is not those who commend themselves that are approved, but those whom the Lord commends. I wish you would bear with me in a little foolishness. Do bear with me! I feel a divine jealousy for you, for I promised you in marriage to one husband, to present you as a chaste virgin to Christ. (1 Corinthians 10:17-11:2, NRSV)

*How was she a saint in waiting
when the world seemed
so stacked against her,
her faith unfashionable,
her beliefs a foible?
When darkness swirled around her,
when fear took root in her world?
And yet her life is light,
her faith a beacon of hope
dispelling darkness,
through one simple decision,
difficult and dangerous,
to remain faithful.*



14 December

St John of the Cross

*Rank on rank the host of heaven
streams before him on the way,
as the Light of light descending
from the realms of endless day
comes, that pow'rs of hell may vanish,
as the shadows pass away.*

(Liturgy of St James, Tr Gerard Moultrie)

For some time now, as we move deeper into winter, the nights have been deepening too, cutting short the daylight hours, plunging our world into darkness, and in a week's time we will experience the shortest and darkest day of the year.

It's understandable perhaps that the world is eager to decorate their homes with light and Christmas colour, brightening the evenings and warming our lives even weeks before Advent begins, yet alone Christmas.

St John of the Cross is well known by his writings on the mystery of the Cross and the 'dark night' of the soul, which perhaps makes him a suitable companion as we journey towards the birth of Jesus, the Light of the World, and whose coming fills the skies with angels' song.

Born in Spain in 1542, St John entered the Carmelite order. Befriended by St Teresa of Avila, he was persuaded to lead the reform of the Order though this caused some difficulties and dangers for him, even being imprisoned by some of his brethren who opposed reform.

A poet and mystic, in one of his poems, the *Dark Night*, from which the phrase, *Dark Night of the Soul* takes its name, he tells of the journey of the soul from its bodily home to union with God. It happens, he says, in the "dark" which are those experiences of hardships and difficulties when attempting to detach from the world and reach the light of union with the Creator.

We all experience varying degrees of difficult times in our life. We may struggle with our faith and our calling. There may be times in our life that we describe as dark. It may be difficult to make sense of our pain and our struggles, be impossible to talk or explain away the dark times.

The Nativity stories are penetrated by sharp references to the passion and death of Christ, and there are many traditions and legends which intertwine his birth and death, his coming into the world and the cross.

Whatever those dark times are for us or those around us, we are drawn close and closer to the light of Christ.

*"Those dear tokens of his passion
still his dazzling body bears,
cause of endless exultation
to his ransomed worshippers:
with what rapture, with what rapture, with what rapture,
gaze we on those glorious scars!"*

(Lo! He comes with clouds descending, Charles Wesley)

Bible Reading

Now large crowds were traveling with him; and he turned and said to them, “Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple. For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not first sit down and estimate the cost, to see whether he has enough to complete it? Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it will begin to ridicule him, saying, ‘This fellow began to build and was not able to finish.’ (Luke 14:25-33)

How many saints are there waiting?

Unseen, unheard,

Alive to God,

Alive to me.

The saints who grieved the past

and let it go with open hands,

watched it blown away by the breath of the Spirit.

They carried the wounds of love,

the scars of life,

walked into a new Kingdom,

where love reigns.

We make no assumptions about the usefulness of the resources we share but only hope that some may find some of them of some use!

And we are always eager to discover resources that others offer!

*Pictures from www.unsplash.com: David Zawila, Mattheus Hohler,
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In the meantime, you can find more resources on our website

WWW.STMARYSCF10.COM