

Sunday, December 23, 2018

Fourth Sunday of Advent

Meditation and Questions for Reflection or Group Discussion

Mass Readings:

1st Reading Micah 5:1-4

Responsorial: Psalm 80:2-3, 15-16, 18-19

2nd Reading: Hebrews 10:5-10

Gospel: Luke 1:39-45

Advent, A Time to Rejoice in the Lord's Great Love for Us

He takes away the first to establish the second. (Hebrews 10:9)

Here we are, just two days before Christmas, and the Scripture readings at Mass are still telling us about all the new things that Jesus' birth has brought about. Take today's second reading. The author of Hebrews tells us that Jesus came to take away one thing—"the first"—and establish something new—"the second" (Hebrews 10:9). What are these two?

The "first" is the entire system of "sacrifices and offerings" that took place in the Jewish Temple (Hebrews 10:8). The time had come to end the practice of offering up bulls and goats in atonement for sin. In place of these sacrifices, Jesus established the "second" thing: "Behold, I come to do your will" (Hebrews 10:9). He replaced countless sacrifices with his own heart of trust and obedience.

God doesn't need our sacrifices. We don't have to convince him to love us. We don't have to prove ourselves to him by giving things up or by working ourselves to death. Of course, he delights in seeing his children making sacrifices for the sake of his Church, but his love doesn't depend on it. It's not something we earn. It's something we receive as a generous gift—just as we receive any gift sitting under our Christmas tree.

Of course, our sacrifices do please the Lord—especially the sacrifices we make for our families and for the poor. But Christmas is about Jesus' love, not our efforts. It's about his generosity, not our hard work. Instead of demanding sacrifices from us, Jesus did the exact opposite: he sacrificed himself for us by becoming a man. Instead of abandoning us because of our sin, he came closer to us so that he could redeem us. Not by our sacrifices. Not by our suffering. But by his love.

There are just two days left. Jesus is about to do a new thing all over again. Fix your eyes on him. Let him reveal this new thing to you—the love that saves and the obedience that sanctifies.

"Jesus, thank you for your love. Thank you for your sacrifice. Thank you for doing your Father's will."

(Many thanks to *The Word Among Us* (www.wau.org) for allowing us to use meditations from their monthly devotional magazine. Used with permission.)

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Questions for Reflection or Group Discussion:

1. The First Reading prophesies the birth of the Jewish Messiah with these words: *Thus says the LORD: You, Bethlehem-Ephrathah too small to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel; whose origin is from of old, from ancient times. He shall take his place as shepherd by the strength of the LORD, by the majestic name of the LORD, his God; And they shall dwell securely, for now his greatness shall reach to the ends of the earth: he shall be peace* (Micah 5:1, 3,4).
 - The Messianic prophecies were fulfilled in unassuming Bethlehem -- a city that the First Reading calls *too small to be among the great clans of Judah*. In what ways, as you reflect on the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem, do God's ideas of greatness sharply contrast with our own ideas of greatness?
 - What are some "small" steps you can take to make sure that the Lord's birth is at the center of your plans for you and family at Christmas?
2. The Responsorial Psalm begins with these words: *O shepherd of Israel, hearken, from your throne upon the cherubim, shine forth. Rouse your power, and come to save us. We respond by praying: Lord, make us turn to you; let us see your face and we shall be saved. The psalm ends with these words: May your help be with the man of your right hand, with the son of man whom you yourself made strong. Then we will no more withdraw from you; give us new life, and we will call upon your name.*
 - In all the activities, and hustle of these last few days before Christmas, what are some practical steps you can take to "turn" to the Lord in prayer, in order to "see" his face.
 - What do these words of the psalmist mean to you: *give us new life, and we will call upon your name*?
3. The Second Reading puts the words from Psalm 40:7-9 in the mouth of Christ addressed to his Father: *Sacrifice and offering you did not desire, but a body you prepared for me; in holocausts and sin offerings you took no delight. Then I said, "As is written of me in the scroll, behold, I come to do your will, O God."* The reading ends with these words: *By this "will," we have been consecrated through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.*
 - How would you describe the meaning of Psalm 49:7-9, as spoken by Jesus?
 - How can you make these words, *behold, I come to do your will, O God*, a greater reality in your own life?
 - What do the words at the end of the reading mean to you?
4. The Gospel reading tells us that *When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the infant leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth, filled with the Holy Spirit, cried out in a loud voice and said, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And how does this happen to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? For at the moment the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the infant in my womb leaped for joy. Blessed are you who believed that what was spoken to you by the Lord would be fulfilled."*
 - In the reading, Elizabeth proclaims these words to Mary: *Blessed are you who believed that what was spoken to you by the Lord would be fulfilled*. In what ways is Mary's trust in God a great model for us?
 - How would you describe the obstacles in your life that can keep you from trusting in God, and from believing in his great love for you and plan for your life?
 - Do you believe that God's grace is sufficient for you to overcome these obstacles? Why or why not?
5. The meditation is a reflection on these words from the Second Reading: *He takes away the first to establish the second* (Hebrews 10:9). It describes the meaning of these words in this way: "The 'first' is the entire system of 'sacrifices and offerings' that took place in the Jewish Temple (Hebrews 10:8). The time had come to end the practice of offering up bulls and goats in atonement for sin. In place of these sacrifices, Jesus established the 'second' thing: 'Behold, I come to do your will' (Hebrews 10:9). He replaced countless sacrifices with his own heart of trust and obedience." The meditation continues with these words: "Instead of demanding sacrifices from us, Jesus did the exact opposite: he sacrificed himself for us by becoming a man. Instead of abandoning us because of our sin, he came closer to us so that he could redeem us. Not by our sacrifices. Not by our suffering. But by his love."
 - How would you summarize how the meditation explains the meaning of Hebrews 10:9?
 - What do the following words from the meditation mean to you? "Instead of abandoning us because of our sin, he came closer to us so that he could redeem us. Not by our sacrifices. Not by our suffering. But by his love"? How are these words related to Hebrews 10:9?

Take some time now to pray and thank the Lord for the saying yes to his Father's will and redeeming us by sacrificing himself as an atonement for our sins. Use the prayer below from end of the meditation as the starting point.

"Jesus, thank you for your love. Thank you for your sacrifice. Thank you for doing your Father's will."

[The discussion questions were created by Maurice Blumberg, who is currently a member of the board of directors of the ChristLife Catholic Ministry for Evangelization (www.christlife.org), a member of the National Service Committee Council of the Catholic Charismatic Renewal (www.nsc-chariscenter.org), and a board member of The Love of Christ Foundation. Prior to this, Maurice was the founding executive director of the National fellowship of Catholic Men, a chairman of the board of *The Word Among Us* (www.wau.org), and a director of partner relations for The Word Among Us Partners ministry. He can be contacted at mblumberg@wau.org or mblumberg@aol.com.]