

**The Sunday before the Nativity 22 December 2019**

**Tone 2**

From the Gospel According to Matthew 1:1-25

"All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet: "Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and his name shall be called Emmanuel" (which means, God with us).

From today's epistle:

St. Paul's Letter to the Hebrews 11:9-10; 32-40

BRETHREN, by faith Abraham sojourned in the land of promise as in a foreign land, living in tents with Isaac and Jacob, heirs with him of the same promise. For he looked forward to the city which has foundation, whose builder and maker is God...

What does the future look like for us? Is there any future? We are waiting for something good to happen or for something bad? Or giving up waiting already? What are we waiting for?

The Mother of God was waiting to give birth, riding on a donkey at the time, finding no room in Bethlehem; the magi were waiting to meet the King travelling from the east; Abraham was waiting in a foreign land, living in a tent (giving up his own comfort) for the city of God; the Three Holy youth were waiting in the furnace and St. Ignatius of Antioch, while traveling in chains to Rome, was waiting to become food for the lions in the arena. St. Ignatius (December 20) was waiting for this in fear: "For I am afraid of your love (he said to the Christians in Rome), lest it should do me an injury. ... I am the wheat of God; let me be ground by the teeth of the wild beasts, that I may be found the pure bread of Christ".

Something changed today in the way we wait. And something didn't. You still find people waiting today while being slowly chewed by the teeth of the lions. And people who are traveling from afar just to be refused a home or sent back to their war zone homeland. The furnace is still burning and people cannot warm themselves but from inside. The difference is that this becomes in itself the object of our longing. Waiting for Christmas to get more depressed. To find the "meaning" of abandonment or rejection in despondency. Like somebody I know who suffers from being alone during the year and on Christmas he is not safe anymore. That's a time that tempts him to give up on life. But this is the way of the world. Disguised in so many different ways. So tempting and so powerful. And so blaming of others. A world broken like never before and at risk, a world that waits for Christ while being asleep or sedated. Mutilated in its being but with a thirst for Him like never before. A Christian can harm with his love a saint who is embraced by Christ in the arena, but could not bring any harm to those who are waiting for the taste of real longing. A drop of his love would bring about an ocean of hope upon a drying soul. The soul of the many who are held captive. Because "...Christianity is not a work of silence only, but also a manifest of greatness...", due to the fact that we know repentance and this is what we are going to do.

Antiphon II.

If the Lord were not among us, who would be sufficient to preserve himself uninjured from the enemy and murderer of mankind?

Hand me not to the teeth of my enemies, O my Saviour; for in the manner of a lion they come against me, Your servant.

As good as it gets

It is not often that coming closer to each other in a community translates into having a "good relationship". At least not in our broken community. Here, with some of us, becoming more personal means becoming more vulnerable. It challenges you to trust. And this unveils layers of pain accumulated from the past. To trust not so much the other but to trust that you can forgive and that you can be forgiven. And this does not always end well. It might not, but sometimes you can discover good chapters. On Thursday, an "old friend" who created so many "bad" stories for us came to have a soup and to thank the church for being there for him. He had just come out of jail (where he spent more than 6 years altogether) and this gave him a break from addictions. He gets some

sleep with his friends (he's been living on the streets for 26 years) and this takes some of the delirium away. In a moment of sincerity he also thanked us for the time when he was banned. Because, he said, he knew in his heart (his mind was occupied with other things) he was doing wrong. Of course, he does not know how long this will last; keeping away from drugs and from street. This has been his life for all these years. And people keep telling him now that it is ok to relapse. He knows that this is technically incorrect (he used a different word). He ended up so many times at the emergency room. Once being in a clinical death after they found him frozen on the street. And relapse is the first step to get you back there. And he does not want to go back because he cares for others. And he does not want to continue to do that to them. So in the end, relationships, as painful as they might be when they become more personal, are the way that make us see beyond ourselves. The incapacity to do so, he said, is the root of all addictions.

## **Eleventh Sunday of Luke 15 December 2019**

### **Tone 1**

**Luke, 14: 16-24** (from today's gospel)

**"A man once gave a great banquet, and invited many..."**

### **Fioretti**

"Oh, brothers and sisters, what a banquet that is! How great is the harmony and joy of those who eat at this heavenly table. Who will be considered worthy to be in that group?"

(St Athanasius)

A few weeks ago we got confused about the calendar at the mission. We read today's gospel and reflected on it when we should have not. On Wednesdays, we try to read and reflect on the gospel of coming Sunday, according to the calendar. And since we have different calendars, we sometimes have different gospels on Sundays, just to increase our confusion, which is already quite significant. At the time, most of the reflections referred to the excuse. Please excuse me, but... We were commenting on this, with one accord...

We try to reflect on the gospel from the experience of our own life and this passage came naturally to most of us. To reflect on how we excuse ourselves from the feast of God. How we get consumed by what God bestowed on us, without being able to see and go to the source. The blessings we receive are the entrees to the banquet. A little bit of his love, so we can receive more. Not to receive everything at once for who could take that? When you come out of the desert thirsty, you don't drink all the water at once, but only a little bit otherwise it can harm you. For the love of God is patient, awaiting the enlargement of our heart, which takes place in time. But then we get stuck in "the little bit". And we make it our own just to forget we have a heart.

So we were commenting more on the excuses, giving details and completing each other. Laura was waiting patiently for her turn and when we got to her she said just a few words. "It is so nice to come here, at church, and have supper together. And this brings so much joy, to be together here at church and to eat together". And after that she added smiling, looking at her friend, "and you Maxima should dress nicely and prepare for it when you come." And then she smiled again. Laura is poor and wounded and disabled. And for her it came naturally to reflect on the feast from the other side of the table. And she did that with such a warm and inviting smile that all of us felt welcome to something new that we thought we had always been avoiding. No more excuses and commentaries on being already full.

### **Prokeimenon - Psalm 115.15,12**

Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his saints. What shall I render to the Lord for all that he has given me?

From St. Paul's Second Letter to Timothy 1:8-18

You are aware that all who are in Asia turned away from me... May the Lord grant mercy to the household of Onesiphoros, for he often refreshed me; he was not ashamed of my chains, but when he arrived in Rome he searched for me eagerly and found me.

Personally, I always felt troubled and uneasy at the way we welcome people who are poor at the feast of the Lord. Afraid not to become familiar and comfortable. We see in the gospel and from our experience at the

mission that the poor and the lame on the one hand, naturally follow the path of humility and so they follow Christ. Those on the hedges, on the other hand, fight with Him, being hunted by the other side of the hedge on a daily basis - the breeze of the desert - but still winning the fight being compelled by Christ. They fight and win even when they lose. God knows how that happens but the gospel does not lie to us. They make it eventually to the banquet. For us, at the door, there is some fear not to make them our own. Not to use, transform them into what they are not, to meet them face to face in freedom and Truth for the sake of the gospel and not for our own sake. And this is not easy. How many times have I failed to do that? How many times I've seen the vulnerable one used, more abused by those who want to do good (losing their soul, as father said, in this attempt) or even worse, turning them into pets. Yes, no joke here. Somebody who needs company when one feels alone, because isn't it so, loneliness is not healthy. To turn the banquet into a party, to try to turn the gospel upside down. I am always somehow haunted by this fear in the back of my mind. Knowing that we are people. And seeing myself failing to encounter the poor through Christ. Seeing this also done around us by people we know.

There is one sign of a healthy relationship though ... The farther we are from being admired by the world for what we do, the closer we are, somehow, to relating in honesty with those who are generally in pain and those who live on the hedges. The more able we are to have attentiveness for the poor and kindness and to struggle with those who have a rough life on the streets and highways - because they've been hunted by death and don't believe so much in the quality of life.

I think, just as an opinion, this would be a healthy sign. The Holy apostle Paul was abandoned by those in Asia and this was for him a sign of recognition of being an apostle, teacher and disciple of Christ. Probably this would be the honest path for us. To get used to being rejected by your own "kin", in order to discover your cross and the honesty of a relationship based on a clear consciousness and a pure heart.

And this would be the reward already. Before the one at the resurrection of the just. A real taste of the real banquet. The Holy apostle Paul was comforted by Onesiphoros while in prison. While being in pain, if we stay in Truth we'll be comforted the same by the love of the poor. The most precious gift of a human being. And, no less than that, with the satisfaction of a good fight with those from the hedges. Hoping that God would compel both. Those who win and those who lose and not leave us alone with our own oxen to fall into despair.

**Luke, 14: 13-14** (the verses before today's gospel)

But when you give a feast, invite the poor, the maimed, the blind...for you shall be repaid at the resurrection of the just.

Deep gratitude for those who organized the banquet on Wednesday for the children.

We have not seen so many children and families at the Mission in a long time. We live with the hope that this will turn into a sign of something good given to us to nurture.

**Tenth Sunday of Luke 08 December 2019**

**Tone 8**

From today's gospel Luke 13:10-17

*"Woman, you are freed from your infirmity"... But the ruler of the synagogue, indignant because Jesus had healed on the Sabbath, said to the people, "There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be healed, and not on the sabbath day."*

On Friday I shared a few moments with a person who spends more time now within our community. A few weeks ago she sang Christmas carols with us outside, on the street. She has really bad diabetes and she does dialysis at St Michael's three times a week. Her face was swollen and this was the first thing she told me, even though there was no way for me to miss that detail. (She cares about the way she looks and she wanted to let me know that it was not her real face). She could not lay down, drink or sleep. She was in pain and a little bit high, I think, when I talked to her. She asked for two cups of tea, which she spilled on the table by mistake. Saying that this was God saving her from the fluids that torment her body. She was really thirsty though and she described to me how thirsty she felt when she wakes up. She knows she should not drink fluids but then how could she say no to water? I didn't know how to bring her the living water, the one that quenches the thirst without taking her to dialysis. Even so, she thanked me for listening to her, I thanked her back for talking to me.

Eventually, we helped her go down the stairs and Joanna took her to her home across the street. In the meantime, George told me things I didn't know about her, like how her brother, who used to come to the breakfast program, was killed in prison one year ago and how they would not give her a new kidney - she says because she has an addiction with drugs.

There is something that scares me in today's gospel about the way the pharisees react when Jesus heals on the Sabbath day. Any other day, but not today should Jesus heal! They preserve a system that harms life in an aggressive way. Not only that there is no care for the suffering, but the system steps on life with no shame. Verbally aggressing Jesus for loving a suffering human being and a suffering humankind. Because the system cannot stand that. People from the mission got it on Wednesday when we talked about the gospel. They said, no system can stand against love. Where love is perishing, make sure you take down the system, otherwise you sin against the Holy Spirit. Which cannot be forgiven, Jesus says.

Our diabetic young woman could have had a chance, the system says, if she was not an addict. To put in other words, her life was not really too precious or worth living because of her addiction. Not worthy to bother trying to save it. The same system though, calls the addiction mental illness. And they put people on ODSP for that. Treating them with harm reduction, where there is no cure. According to their universal approach to everything. They make it impossible for people who want to kill the addiction. Because they think it is better to preserve the addiction at any cost. For there is no hope to be healed. But this legally and officially qualifies you for being rejected from a kidney transplant, so better get used to the thought you are going to die. Don't worry, you'll be dying without transgressing any law. According to the rule.

In a manner similar to the harm reduction approach the pharisees kept people captive in a system killing any attempt to bring life to those who suffer. They killed God eventually just to receive in exchange resurrection and eternal life. And real hope for us to find a better way to look for the water that quenches the thirst but does not take you to St Michael's for dialysis.

From Antiphon IV

*Behold, what is so good or so delightful as for brothers to reside together? For in this has the Lord promised life everlasting.*

*Today the virgin is on her way to the cave where she will give birth to the eternal Word of God in an ineffable manner. Rejoice therefore, all universe when you hear this news and glorify with the angels and the shepherds, Him who shall appear as a new child being God from all eternity.*

We have tried, for a while, to keep the scriptures open on a table during the day, together with the life of the saints. With the hope that the gospel would be searched by people, once in a while, to receive comfort. We all need that. We experience a lot of resistance, even hatred at times. Joanna being the beneficiary of most of that because she was the most ardent protector. One morning, I was thinking for myself if it was worth doing it. Not to antagonize the people too much, just because this was the way we decided to make the gospel visible (even though I have to recognize that the appearance of the gospel did not go unnoticed within the room. And this was already a good thing). So, I thought I should just sit at the table to see if anybody would be interested that morning to read or ask a question or anything that would help me clear my thoughts. I did not have to wait too long. A muslim woman showed up. She was doing her practicum up the street at the school. She had come to the mission for the first time one morning the week before, to ask for a bible. And then she decided it was better to read with me and ask questions since the bible was already open on the table. She said she loved Jesus and wanted to find out more. She came three weeks in a row, last time she brought us coffee too on Thursday. It is hard for her to understand how God became man and died on the cross and resurrected. She keeps saying, after reading the gospel, that she had heard something else. She believes in the second coming though and she is waiting with hope. Her repetitive questions and doubt made me think more about what we know. And how we don't ponder on the mystery of God becoming man. We know so much and yet, keep so little, at times, within our heart. And yet, without knowing it, by asking and doubting she keeps so much within hers.

**Fourteenth Sunday of Luke 01 December 2019**

**Tone 7**

From the PS 69:

"Let their eyes be darkened that they may not see, and their back do Thou continually bow down. For they persecuted him whom Thou has smitten, and to the pain of my wounds they added. I will praise the Name of my God with an ode, I will magnify him with praise. Let beggars behold it and be glad; seek after God, and your soul shall live."

Living is a matter of seeking. Because we are seeking the One who is risen from the death. "Woman whom are you seeking?"... We are seeking life, being tired of death. We are tired of adding more pain to the one already there.

In a state of darkness we desire life and look for it. We do not let ourselves be paralyzed by darkness and by pain. We do not make a comfortable dwelling within our wounds covering our heart in pain. When our tomb is occupied we go to the one which is empty, early in the morning, with songs of praise so our soul shall live.

We go even when we cannot see. Slowly through the darkness. Because we can hear the song. This is what becomes our companion. This is what becomes a path in darkness. And we stop begging from people because we can ask from God. So our soul can live.

That's what people who are homeless (homeless not only because they are looking for the empty tomb) in a strange land told us on Wednesday in the chapel, when reflecting on today's gospel. That through our faith we encounter God. We do not wait for him to come, but we make the encounter happen. Through our faith we journey towards the empty tomb. We hear the song and follow it and we do not stop when other voices get in the way. We reject the noise because we listen to the song of praise. We reject the pain because we long for healing.

Within the encounter, people also said, God speaks to you, asking you a question? So we learn now not only to see but also to speak. So others can hear and listen. We are not beggars for crumbs but for life. We want to see and hear and touch in a perfect manner. To learn to love His name so we can live and inherit His dwelling.

From today's gospel:

"...as Jesus drew near to Jericho, a blind man was sitting by the roadside begging; and hearing a multitude going by, he inquired what this meant. They told him, "Jesus of Nazareth is passing by." And he cried, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" And those who were in front rebuked him, telling him to be silent; but he cried out all the more, "Son of David, have mercy on me!"