



Contributed by Father Raphael Ma, C.R.

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FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT
December 19, 2021

GATHERING TIME

(10-15 Minutes)

Introduction to the Word:

There is a classical piece I've heard on the radio, in movies, and other contexts, which I have always found to be quite stirring. It's called "Zadok the Priest," an anthem composed by George Frederick Handel for the occasion of the coronation of King George II of England. Give it a listen, at least the first three minutes. It's only about five to six minutes long, and the first third is based on the text of 1 Kings 1:34, where David instructs the priest Zadok and the prophet Nathan to anoint Solomon as king over Israel. This text is claimed to have been used with minor variations for almost a millennia in the coronation of English monarchs. Handel's musical setting was so well received, that his version has been used at the coronation ceremony of every British monarch ever since its composition in 1727.

Although it seems common sense to us, it was unique in its time that the roles of priest, prophet, and king were strictly kept separate in Israel. As we see in 1 Kings 1:34, Zadok the priest, Nathan the prophet, and Solomon (whom they anointed as king) were clearly three different people. But in almost every other ancient civilization, the monarch always held both a political and religious role. On a practical level, this was meant to prevent the existence of a rival religious power structure that could set itself up in opposition to the political power structure.

But what was unique to Israel was that they were chosen to be God's Kingdom on this earth—that is, God was the one who ruled over them. Later, out of accommodation to Israel's desire to be like other nations and have an earthly king of their own, this still continued through the stipulation that the king could never also fulfill the role of a priest, which in the Old Covenant could only be exercised by the descendants of the tribe of Levi.

When Saul attempted to carry out the role of a priest and to offer the sacrifice in 1 Samuel 13:9-14, the prophet Samuel rebukes him and tells him that God will take away the kingship from him. Later in history, the opposite occurs when Simon Maccabeus (of the priestly family of the tribe of Levi that led the revolt we read about in the two books of the Maccabees) sets up an independent kingdom and becomes both its high priest and political leader [1 Maccabees 14:47]. The Hasmonean dynasty, as it was called, lasted for almost a century until Herod the Great replaced them with the support of the Romans. And the reign of Herod, of course, brings us to the eve of the events of Christmas, which are fast approaching as we near the end of the Advent season.

Warm-up Activity *(about 8-12 minutes):*

Some questions to reflect on by yourself or with a group:

1. Has there ever been a time when you took matters into your own hands, or looked to some human person or authority because you felt God was being “silent” or not responding “quickly” enough?
2. What does it mean for God to rule over your life? What would that look like?
3. How do you think the roles of priest, prophet, and king coincide in Jesus?

TABLE OF THE WORD

Our opening prayer today is the same as the opening prayer for October 7th, the feast of Our Lady of the Rosary. If you’ve ever prayed the Marian devotion known as “the Angelus,” you’ll recognize that it is the concluding prayer that is said after the three Hail Marys.

Like many ancient practices of the Church, its origins were not neatly recorded step by step, but reflecting on historical evidence here and there can give us some idea of how the devotion originated. You have probably heard that the material origins of the Rosary as we know it today began as a way for Christians (both religious and lay alike) who were not literate to imitate and participate in the praying of the Psalms, which was done by many people who were literate. Just as there were 150 Psalms, these people would pray 150 Paternosters (Our Fathers) to pray in their own way, what the literate people were praying. Eventually, when the Hail Mary became a popular prayer, around the time of St. Dominic, the practice of praying 150 Ave Marias (Hail Marys) came into familiar practice.

The Angelus seems to have begun as an evening devotion. There is a decree from a General Chapter of the Franciscans around the year 1269, that preachers should encourage the faithful to pray three Hail Marys when the bell was rung after the friars concluded their night prayers. The appropriateness of this was seen in light of the belief at the time that it was in the evening that the Angel Gabriel appeared to the Blessed Virgin Mary. Within a few centuries, praying the Angelus in the morning and midday also became customary, commemorating the Resurrection of Jesus, and His Passion respectively.

So next time you pray the Angelus at the customary times, you can call to mind these three mysteries of the life of Jesus as you do so.

Penitential Rite:

Leader:

Lord Jesus, you came to gather the nations into the peace of God’s Kingdom, **Lord, have mercy.**

Lord Jesus, you come in Word and Sacrament to strengthen us in holiness, **Christ, have mercy.**

Lord Jesus, you will come in glory with salvation for your people, **Lord, have mercy.**

Let us pray:

Pour forth, we beseech you, O Lord, your grace into our hearts, that we to whom the Incarnation of Christ your Son was made known by the message of an Angel, may by his Passion and Cross be brought to the glory of his Resurrection. Who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, God, for ever and ever. Amen.

SCRIPTURE REFLECTION TIME (45 minutes)

*(As Christians we believe that the **WORD** of God we hear proclaimed each Sunday is an empowering word, and that God is present in the word proclaimed. This is the word that God wants us to hear today. The dynamic of the small Christian community, namely, reflecting on our life story within the context of this word, and sharing the insights of these reflections, is such that God's Spirit becomes present, and the gifts of the Spirit are experienced as empowering and life giving.)*

FIRST READING Micah 5:1-4a

The Lord says to his people:

"You, Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the little clans of Judea, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days."

Therefore he shall give them up until the time when she who is to give birth has brought forth; then the rest of his kindred shall return to the children of Israel.

And he shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of the Lord, in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God.

And they shall live secure, for now he shall be great to the ends of the earth; and he shall be peace.

The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

SECOND READING Hebrews 10:5-10

Brothers and sisters:

When Christ came into the world, he said:

"Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired, but a body you prepared for me; in burnt offerings and sin offerings you have taken no pleasure. Then I said, as is written of me in the scroll of the book, 'See, God, I come to do your will, O God.'"

When Christ said, "You have neither desired nor taken pleasure in sacrifices and offerings, and burnt offerings and sin offerings" (these are offered according to the Law), then he added, "See, I have come to do your will."

He abolishes the first in order to establish the second. And it is by God's will that we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.

The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God**

GOSPEL Luke 1:39-45

Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah, and greeted Elizabeth.

When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry,

"Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me?"

For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord."

The Gospel of the Lord. **Praise to you, Lord Jesus Christ.**

COMMENTARY:

FIRST READING

When the wise men from the east came to Jerusalem looking for the newborn king of the Jews, St. Matthew tells us that Herod called together the chief priests and scribes to find out where the prophets said the Messiah was to be born. And the prophecy in which they found their answer also happens to be our first reading today.

According to the list of kings at the beginning of the book of the prophet Micah, Micah seems to have been a contemporary of Isaiah who, like Isaiah, foretells the coming destruction of Jerusalem and the exile to Babylon. In the face of this coming demise of the great House of David, Micah is clear that the destruction and exile are not the end, and that a ruler will arise from Bethlehem, which the first chapter of the book of Ruth tells us was the hometown of Naomi, the great-grandmother of King David.

That this ruler will come from Bethlehem, rather than Jerusalem which became David's capital at the height of his power, evokes a kind of "back to the beginning," a returning to the origins of what made David originally a man after God's own heart [1 Samuel 13:14; Acts 13:22]. And the way that this ruler will act also echoes those Davidic elements of a shepherd (describing his relationship to his people as caring for a flock) and of a king (bringing about security and peace).

Sometimes it is pointed out that certain Old Testament prophecies referred primarily to an event that occurred in the Old Testament, and only later are they revealed to have their ultimate revelation in Jesus. But the verse in our first reading: "whose origin is from of old, from ancient days" seems to resist this kind of interpretation. In our Introduction to the Word, we saw how the original covenant promise was that God would rule over His chosen people. Perhaps something different than merely human kingship is being hinted at in the origins of this ruler who is to arise.

One other small detail worth noting is the meaning of the name "Bethlehem." In Hebrew, it means "House of Bread." Certainly, from a Eucharistic perspective, that is an interesting "coincidence."

SECOND READING

If our First Reading foretells Jesus as a Davidic king, and the fulfillment of that original kingship of God that was promised in the Old Covenant, then our Second Reading clearly speaks of Jesus as a priest. Very quickly, however, it is established that Jesus' priesthood is different from that of the Levitical priests of the Old Covenant who offered the "sacrifices and offerings" mentioned at the beginning of this reading.

The potential to divorce the external act of offering a sacrifice from the internal disposition it is supposed to express is a perennial problem, and one that was repeatedly pointed out by the prophets, as we see in 1 Samuel 15:22, Isaiah 1:11, Jeremiah 6:20, Hosea 6:6, Amos 5:22, in various psalms, and as referenced by Jesus Himself in the Gospels.

The author of the letter to the Hebrews chooses to quote Psalm 39(40):6-7. Although, if we actually look this passage up, we will notice that there are two variations. One variation, based on the Hebrew, says “ears,” while the other variation, based on the Septuagint (Greek), says “body,” which is quoted by the author of the letter to the Hebrews. However, this does amount to the same thing, since “ears” here clearly refers to obedience, which if carried out, would involve one’s whole “body.”

And it is in this sense that we can understand the priesthood of Jesus. Jesus bridged the potential gap between external act and internal disposition, by coming to do, and actually doing, the will of God with His own body. And it is Jesus’ obedience which is the source of our being “sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.” Just as truly obedient or listening ears will extend to involve one’s whole body, Jesus’ obedience will also extend to involve His own mystical body, all the Christian faithful.

Gospel

And finally, in our Gospel we see a richly prophetic exchange. Jesus’ relative, John the Baptist, whom Jesus would later acknowledge as not only a prophet, but more than a prophet [Matthew 11:9], leaps in his mother Elizabeth’s womb at the sound of Mary’s greeting.

Although prophets did sometimes foretell the future, the prophet’s main role was to announce God’s Word to God’s people – which sometimes regarded the future. The sound of Mary’s voice is in itself a kind of prophecy, announcing her presence, and the presence of the One she is carrying in her womb. Elizabeth is filled with the Holy Spirit, who speaks through the prophets, and pronounces a blessing on Mary, for believing God’s Word – “what was spoken to her by the Lord.” And of course, John the Baptist is responding to God’s Word made flesh in his own wordless, enfleshed way as a fellow baby *in utero*.

In line with our first reading and its evocation of things having to do with David, we may also notice a similarity between the leaping of John the Baptist in the womb, and David’s leaping and dancing before the Ark of the Covenant as he brought it from the house of Obed-edom, after it remained there for three months [2 Samuel 6:16]—the same amount of time St. Luke tells us Mary stayed with her cousin Elizabeth!

Allow 5 – 10 minutes for the participants to react to the **commentary** to identify a newly discovered insight.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION:

- 1) The last Sunday before Advent is the Solemnity of Christ the King. Sometimes people find the notion of Jesus as a king to be outdated. What are your ideas about Jesus as king in light of our First Reading and God’s promise to be king over God’s people?
- 2) What has obedience to God in your life looked like over the years? Has the divorce between external act and internal disposition been a struggle for you? How does Jesus’ obedience extend into your life as a member of His body?
- 3) Our brief Gospel passage today is a rich tapestry of God’s Word being announced in just one event. Have you ever experienced events in your life richly speaking God’s Word to you?

CARING-PRAYING TIME: (15-20 minutes)

1. **Word of the Week**: "See, I have come to do your will."

2. **Suggestions for the Week**:

Although perhaps an in-person visit may not be a possibility due to COVID-19 precautions, at least consider calling or writing to someone with whom you can speak about faith-related things, to bring them joy like Mary did for Elizabeth, by sharing some good news of how God is currently at work in your life.

3. **Intercessions**: (Response: **Lord, hear our prayer**)

Leader: Let us turn to God and offer Him our prayers.

For the Church, that God will give us open ears to listen and obey Him, we pray to the Lord ...

For those in positions of authority in our communities, that they will care for all members of the flock entrusted to them, we pray to the Lord...

For peace in the Holy Land, we pray to the Lord...

For all those who have yet to hear God's Word, we pray to the Lord...

For those who have lost faith and hope, that they will open themselves to God's surprises, we pray to the Lord ...

For the sick, the suffering, those who have asked us to pray for them, and for those who have died and those who mourn for them, we pray to the Lord...

Let us pray:

Having received this pledge of eternal redemption,
we pray, almighty God, that,
as the feast day of our salvation
draws ever nearer,
so we may press forward
all the more eagerly to the
worthy celebration of the mystery
of your Son's Nativity.
Who lives and reigns for ever and ever.
Amen.

With hands and hearts united in gratitude for God's favours today, we pray that all those in our influence be moved to be open to your Word and your Spirit, while we pray as one, **OUR FATHER...**

Celebrating the Word, Resurrection Ministries of the Congregation of the Resurrection Ontario-Kentucky Province (including the former Resurrection Centre), 265 Westmount Road North, Waterloo, Ontario, Canada N2L 3G7. (**Celebrating the Word** was founded by Father Frank Ruetz, C.R. deceased 2012). For information: **website**: www.resurrectionists.ca. **Email**: provincialoffice@resurrectioncollege.ca The Scripture version used in this commentary is the **New Revised Standard Version** (copyrighted by the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA).