

## 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Advent B “Open Your Hearts for Christmas”

Fr. Frank Schuster

What is your favorite Christmas memory? Think about it. Now, how do we make this Christmas even better? We can take a hint from Mother Teresa who said, everything begins with prayer. I invite you to listen to what St. Bernard of Clairvaux has to say about this Gospel reading and consider, if you haven't already, why this 11<sup>th</sup> century man is a spiritual master and doctor of the church. I found this in our office of readings in the liturgy of the hours. I like to share these readings from time to time so that we can be enriched by centuries old wisdom and piety.

He writes this homily as a petition to our Lady, but notice how he is also talking directly to us, teaching us, inviting us to enter deeper into the mystery. He writes, “You have heard, O Virgin, that you will conceive and bear a son; you have heard that it will not be by man but by the Holy Spirit. The angel awaits an answer; it is time for him to return to God who sent him. We too are waiting, O Lady, for your word of compassion; the sentence of condemnation weighs heavily upon us. The price of our salvation is offered to you. We shall be set free at once if you consent. In the eternal Word of God we all came to be, and behold, we die. In your brief response we are to be remade in order to be recalled to life. Tearful Adam with his sorrowing family begs this of you, O loving Virgin, in their exile from Paradise. Abraham begs it, David begs it. All the other holy patriarchs, your ancestors, ask it of you, as they dwell in the country of the shadow of death. This is what the whole earth waits for, prostrate at your feet. It is right in doing so, for on your word depends comfort for the wretched, ransom for the captive, freedom for the condemned, indeed, salvation for all the sons of Adam, the whole of your race. Answer quickly, O Virgin. Reply in haste to the angel or rather through the angel to the Lord. Answer with a word, receive the Word of God. Speak your own word, conceive the divine Word. Breathe a passing word, embrace the eternal Word. Why do you delay, why are you afraid? Believe, give praise, and receive. Let humility be bold, let modesty be confident. This is no time for virginal simplicity to forget prudence. In the matter alone, O prudent Virgin, do not fear to be presumptuous. Though modest silence is pleasing, dutiful speech is now more necessary. Open your heart to faith, O blessed Virgin, your lips to praise, your womb to the Creator. See, the desired of all nations is at your door, knocking to enter. If he should pass by because of your delay, in sorrow you would begin to seek him afresh, the One whom your soul loves. Arise, hasten, open. Arise in faith, hasten in devotion, open in praise and thanksgiving. *Behold, the handmaid of the Lord, she says, be it done to me according to your word.*”

Isn't that fantastic? And they call the 11<sup>th</sup> century the dark ages! There is a lot of light and wisdom in those centuries too. St. Bernard's thoughts also work well with our first reading. In it David is worried about the fact that he was sleeping in a palace while the Ark of the Covenant was outside in the traditional sacred tent that had always been used to shelter the Holy of Holies. David asks

God if he could build Him a temple, a noble House of God, for the Ark. I find God's answer to David to be entertaining. God essentially tells David, "What? You build me a house? Listen, it is I who build you a house. It is not you who build me a house." That effectively put David squarely in his place. That God chose to be born of a peasant woman in a manger surrounded by animals and shepherds rather than in a temple of a noble family is also a similar commentary I believe on what God thinks about the human race.

And so what does this mean for us as we come close to the celebration of our savior's birth? What can it mean? I think, first of all, we are invited to slow down, just slow down and gain perspective. Any of you try to brave Christmas shopping this past week? There is a lot of impatience out there. It can be healthy to consider that no matter how much we try to clean the house and decorate the tree to make a special place for Jesus in our homes this Christmas, it is good to remind ourselves that it isn't us who build a place for Jesus. It is Jesus who gives us a place in his life. As much as we wonder what we should put under the tree on Christmas morning, Jesus has already given us the most precious gift of all, the gift of himself, the gift of salvation.

And so, think of the most special Christmas in your memory. How do we make this Christmas even better? Mother Teresa is right when she says everything begins with prayer, with a relationship with the Lord. St. Bernard is right when he suggests to us that our lives ought to be filled with gratitude. Everything that God gives us is a gift. And so our Blessed Mother is right when she offers her life to God in return. Can we do so as well?

And so, St. Bernard is also talking directly to you and to me when he passionately implores us to not miss the invitation God is offering us this Christmas. He begs us, "See, the desired of all nations is at our door, knocking to enter." He is at our door. If he should pass by because of our delay, in sorrow we would begin to seek him afresh, the One whom our soul loves. Arise, hasten, open. Arise in faith, hasten in devotion, open in praise and thanksgiving. This Christmas, can Mary's response be our own. *Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord, be it done to me according to your word.*