



Fourth Sunday

St Joseph Gives Jesus his Name (Mt 1:18-24)

The Gospel for the last Sunday in Advent doesn't beat about the bush with regard to Jesus' identity. He is "Jesus Christ" or "Jesus the Messiah".

Joseph is betrothed to Mary. Betrothal in Jewish custom was more than a modern "engagement". It was almost as binding as marriage itself – cf. v. 19 where Joseph is called Mary's "husband" (literally "man") and v. 20 where she is called his "wife". But a betrothed couple did not "come together", that is, live together or have marital relations before they were formally married.

Both the Gospel of Matthew and the Gospel of Luke emphatically state that the source of the pregnancy was the Holy Spirit, not Joseph or any other man. Thus it is clear to us that Jesus had his origin in God.

Joseph, however, did not know this. Whose baby was this? By quietly releasing Mary from her betrothal obligations, Joseph (who, we are told, was a just man) would avoid exposing Mary to public disgrace.

God took the next step and directly revealed the baby's true identity to Joseph by an angel in a dream. The angel addresses Joseph himself with a royal title: "Son of David". By marrying Mary, her unborn child would naturally inherit this same royal title (cf. the genealogies in Matthew 1:1-16 and Luke 3:23-38, both of which trace Jesus' ancestry through Joseph). So Jesus has his divine origin from the Holy Spirit, his humanity from the Virgin Mary, and his royal identity from St Joseph.

Finally, Joseph is told that he is to give his royal Spirit-conceived newborn a personal name. "Jesus" is the New Testament Greek form of the Old Testament name "Joshua", which means "The Lord saves". This "Saviour" will save his people from their sins.

The last words of Scripture on this final Sunday of Advent are a prophecy which relates directly to the identity of this "Coming One". His coming should not have been unexpected. Isaiah had foretold six hundred years earlier that "a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and his name shall be called Emmanuel, which means God with us." (Mt 1:23; Is 7:14) Matthew picks up this prophetic name at the very end of his Gospel where Jesus promises: "Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age" (Mt 28:20).

And so we return to where we began: Jesus is the Messiah, the One who came, the One who comes, and the One who will come again.

"Hope, O my soul, hope. You know neither the day nor the hour. Watch carefully, for everything passes quickly, even though your impatience makes doubtful what is certain, and turns a very short time into a long one. Dream that the more you struggle, the more you prove the love that you bear your God, and the more you will rejoice one day with your Beloved, in a happiness and rapture that can never end." (Excl. 15:3)

St Teresa of Avila

Therefore, to say, "they shall call him Emmanuel", means nothing else than that they shall see God amongst men. For He has indeed always been amongst men, but never so manifestly."

St John Chrysostom - Homily V

Questions for discussion

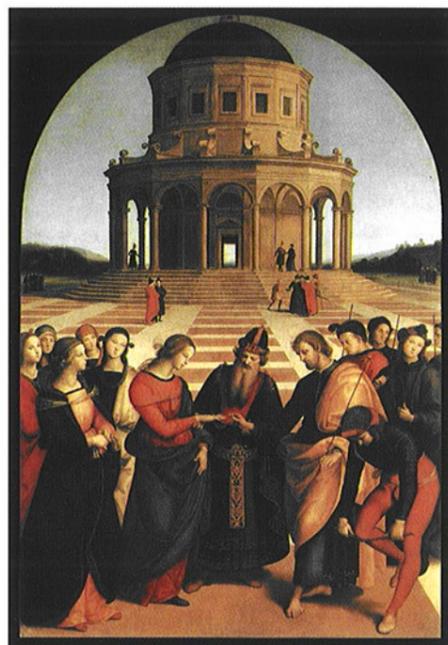
1. The article says that "Christ's coming to us in the Eucharist points us in hope toward his coming in glory." How can we prepare ourselves for his coming in the Eucharist so that we appreciate that the One we receive is the One who is to come?

2. John the Baptist preached repentance as a way of preparing for the coming of Christ. Many people will seek forgiveness of their sins in the sacrament of Reconciliation as a way of preparing for Christmas. How can we help the many others that still do not know Christ to encounter him at Christmas?

3. John the Baptist prepared his followers to follow Jesus. How can we help the many people who still do not know Christ to encounter him at Christmas?

4. What customs do you live in your family to prepare for Christmas that you would like to share with the others?

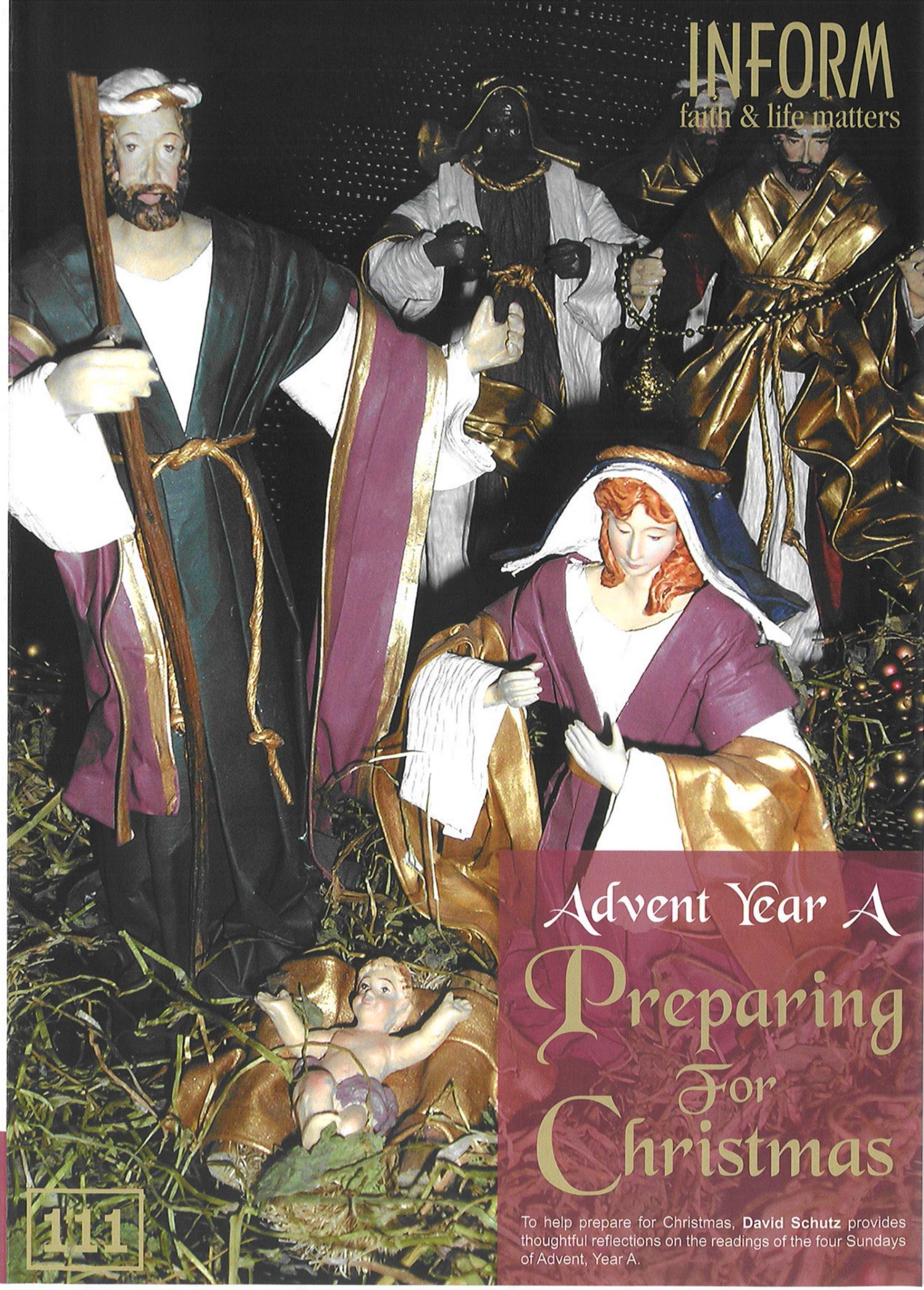
David Schutz is Executive Officer of the Commission for Ecumenism and Inter-faith Relations of the Archdiocese of Melbourne.



The Nativity Scene

"In addition to the representations of the crib found in churches since antiquity, the custom of building cribs in the home was widely promoted from the thirteenth century, influenced undoubtedly by St Francis of Assisi's crib in Greccio. Their preparation, in which children play a significant role, is an occasion for the members of the family to come into contact with the mystery of Christmas, as they gather for a moment of prayer or to read the biblical accounts of the Lord's birth." (Directory on Popular Piety and the Liturgy, 104)

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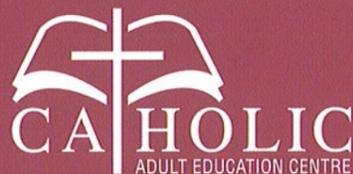
Advent Year A
Preparing
For
Christmas

To help prepare for Christmas, David Schutz provides thoughtful reflections on the readings of the four Sundays of Advent, Year A.

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Published six times a year, INFORM is available from:

Catholic Adult Education Centre, Sydney
Locked Bag 888 Silverwater DC NSW 1811
P (02) 9643 3660 F (02) 9643 3669
E info@caec.com.au



INFORM - 50c per copy (minimum order: 10 copies per issue) Single subscription \$10 per year within Australia, 6 issues annually, or with the newsletter of the Catholic Adult Education Centre \$15 per year. Single copy of every back issue of INFORM still in print - \$40 per set.

Published with ecclesiastical approval / © 2007 CAEC / EDITOR Fr John Flader / DESIGN Natalie Marguritta S.

Introduction

"Surely I am coming soon". Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!" (Rev 22:20)

"Behold, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, every one who pierced him; and all tribes of the earth will wail on account of him. Even so. Amen". (Rev 1:7)

The New Testament knew the Lord Jesus as the "One who comes" or "the Coming One". Since the earliest times, Christians have welcomed the coming Christ at each celebration of the Eucharist, singing in the *Sanctus*, "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord". The cry "*marana tha*" – Come, O Lord! (1 Cor 16:22) – was also a part of each Eucharist, and still is today in the Memorial Acclamation. In this way, Christ's coming to us in the Eucharist points us in hope toward his coming in glory.

The Gospels for the Sundays of Advent in Year A focus on the identity of Jesus as "the Coming One". In the Gospel for the Third Sunday, St John the Baptist asks if Jesus "is the One to come, or shall we look for another?" After two thousand years, perhaps our problem today is that the Church has stopped looking for "the One to come". We have become satisfied with the hidden presence of Christ and have forgotten that he promised a time to come when "every eye shall see him" (Rev 1:7).

The Advent Gospels give shape and texture to the Advent Liturgy. Each Advent in the three-year cycle has some elements in common, and some elements which give it a distinctive character. The First Sunday always begins where the previous Church Year left off, by focusing on the "second coming" of Christ. Then, for the next two weeks, there is a shift to the message of St John the Baptist, which directly preceded the beginning of Jesus' adult ministry.

In the Fourth Sunday, the focus shifts to the announcement of Jesus' coming at his birth. Years B and C use St Luke's account of the Annunciation and Visitation respectively, but in Year A we read St Matthew's account of Jesus' birth, which focuses on the "annunciation" to St Joseph.

And so, living Advent through the Gospels involves us in a kind of "reverse anticipation" of the Coming Lord. We begin by looking to his future coming, and gradually change our focus to his former coming as we prepare for the feast of his birth in Bethlehem. In this way we are alerted to the full identity of the baby in the manger: he is the One who came, the One who comes and the One who will come again.

First Sunday

The Coming of the Son of Man (Mt 24:37-44)

This Gospel comes from the last week of Jesus' life. While it focuses on the future or "second" coming of Christ, it is related to his death and resurrection in the past. The death of Jesus was a totally unexpected—yet decisive—moment in Jesus' ministry. Although many in first century Judaism looked for the coming Messiah (e.g. Simeon in Luke 2:26), no one was expecting a Messiah who would be crucified. They had even less expectation that he would rise again.

In effect, the death and resurrection of Jesus led to the inauguration of the Kingdom that John the Baptist had proclaimed as "near", and the marks of Jesus' crucifixion will still be seen when he comes again in glory (cf. Jn 20:27 and Rev 1:7).

Jesus compares his present generation to the people who lived "in the days of Noah". Like the flood, the coming of the Son of Man will be experienced as a sudden and unexpected judgment. In those days they were "eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage". In other words, it was "business as usual". Those who marry and give in marriage are expecting that the future will be little different from the present.

Jesus' words remind us that something is going happen that will break the age-old cycle of births, deaths and marriages: the Son of Man is Coming!

Who is this "Son of Man"? In Daniel 7:13-14 the "Son of Man" is described as "coming on the clouds of heaven", a phrase that Jesus uses at Matthew 26:64 during his trial. It also connects with Acts 1:9-11 and Revelation 1:7. Strangely, Jesus adopts it as his own way of referring to himself. It has not been customary in the Church to use the phrase "Son of Man" as a way of addressing Jesus or of speaking of him.

When the Son of Man comes, some will be ready and prepared and will therefore not be judged (just as Noah was ready for the flood), whereas others will not be prepared and they will be judged (just like those who were swept away by the flood). A hidden speed camera provides a good analogy. Those who are watchful and careful not to speed will not be "taken" by the unexpected camera. Those who are not careful will be "taken" unawares – and judged in that moment.

Jesus' warning to the disciples to "keep awake" for "you do not know" when to expect the coming Son of Man is especially poignant in view of the events in the Garden of Gethsemane. Jesus' disciples have been with him all along, but even they do not expect the "new thing" that God is about to do in his Son Jesus.

To "keep watch" means to "keep vigil", like a watchman on the lookout for danger. It is a serious matter to be "on watch" in the military, and the punishment for falling asleep is severe. We too



must be vigilant. We often attend "vigil Masses" on the night before a Sunday or a feast day. The Mass on Christmas Eve, for example, is a "vigil Mass". When attending these Masses, we would do well to keep this verse in mind.

We should always be watchful, for we do not know when the Son of Man is coming.

Second Sunday

The One Coming After John (Mt 3:1-12)

The desert is a wild, dangerous place, but the people of Israel recalled it as their "birthplace". After the Exodus, Moses led them in the wilderness for forty years, and Joshua led them into the promised land through the River Jordan. John the Baptist lived in this wilderness, but he had a message for the world.

People from "Jerusalem and all Judea and all the region about the Jordan" went out into the wilderness to hear John's message. He proclaimed that God's Kingdom – which many Jews were eagerly awaiting – had finally "come near". The only appropriate response to this announcement was repentance.

What is "repentance"? The Greek word means "to get a new mind" or "to change your way of thinking". A change of heart was necessary in order to receive the Kingdom which had come so near. Repentance also "bears fruit" in a change of life (v. 8). It is not just an outward appearance but comes from a deep change in the inner state of the soul and is seen by its fruit. Repentance is also urgent, because "the axe... is at the root" (v. 10), i.e. the Kingdom is coming soon.

Who was John? What was his task? The Jews in the first century were firmly of the opinion that the age of the prophets was over. For them, John must have seemed like something straight out of

their ancient history, reminding them of their desert origins. He aroused a great deal of curiosity.

St Matthew says that John was "the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke". Isaiah 40:3 reads: "A voice cries out: 'In the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord'". Isaiah was speaking to the exiles in Babylon and referring to the road "through the wilderness" that God was preparing to take them back to the restored Jerusalem. It would be a "new exodus". John also had come to prepare the way for a new exodus. Perhaps that is yet another reason why his ministry takes place at the Jordan river.

John's diet and clothing also indicate something of his identity. "Locusts and wild honey" may be an intended reference to Samson (Judg 14: 5-20), but John's clothing recalls what the prophet Elijah wore (cf. 2 Kings 1:8). Malachi 4:5-6 had predicted the return of Elijah as a sign of the Messianic age. John was not Elijah "reincarnated", but even Jesus himself later connected John the Baptist with this expectation (cf. Mt 11:13).

John's actions also tell us something of his mission. "To baptise" means "to dip", or "immerse". Gentile converts to Judaism were baptised, the so-called "proselyte baptism". John suggests that all Jews – despite their ancestry (see v.9) – still needed a defining conversion and commitment to God. Without it, they are no better than Gentiles.

Those who prided themselves in being "children of Abraham" (v. 9) were denounced as a "brood of vipers" (literally, "offspring of vipers")! John says that God can raise up "children of Abraham" from stones if he wants to. Thus the coming Kingdom was already appearing as a threat to the established religious ideas.

Now John changes the focus of his message from the Kingdom to the King. "One... is coming after me". John's ministry is only "stage one" of God's plan for the coming Kingdom. In traditional iconography, John is depicted as pointing to Jesus. The One who is coming is more powerful than John, because, unlike John's baptism, his baptism will have the power to give the gift of the Holy Spirit to all who receive it.

Advent is a time to repent, so that we are prepared for the coming of Christ. Then we too, like John the Baptist, can prepare the way of the Lord for others.

The Jesse Tree

The Jesse Tree takes its name from Isaiah 11:1: "A shoot will spring forth from the stump of Jesse, and a branch out of his roots."



Jesse Trees are often used in churches and schools during Advent to remind us of the long family tree of Jesus, beginning with Jesse, the father of King David. The branches of the tree bear the names of the ancestors of Christ, with Jesus and Mary at the top.

Jesse Trees have appeared in artworks since the Middle Ages. The beautiful stained glass Jesse Tree window in the Cathedral of Chartres (depicted left) dates to 1145 AD.

Memory Awakens Hope

"Advent is concerned with that very connection between memory and hope which is so necessary to man. Advent's intention is to awaken the most profound and basic emotional memory within us, namely, the memory of the God who became a child. This is a healing memory; it brings hope. The purpose of the Church's year is continually to rehearse her great history of memories, to awaken the heart's memory so that it can discern the star of hope..."

Pope Benedict XVI - *Seek That Which Is Above*, 1986

Third Sunday

Is Jesus the One Who is to Come? (Mt 11:2-11)

As a result of John the Baptist's outspoken preaching, Herod has imprisoned him. John has heard about "the deeds of the Christ" (literally, "what the Messiah was doing"). "Messiah" is Hebrew for "Anointed One", which in Greek is "Christ". It is a *title*, not a name. The point at issue for John is whether Jesus is really the Messiah whom God had promised or not. That is, is Jesus "the One who is to come?"

Despite the fact that Jesus is doing "the deeds of the Christ", John is perplexed because Jesus does not seem to be doing what John had predicted he would do (cf. Mt 3:11-12). The powerful, fiery judgment has not appeared. Is Jesus really the Messiah? Or should they be looking for "another" *different* sort of Messiah? He sends his disciples to ask Jesus for an answer.

Jesus does not give John a direct "Yes" or "No" answer. He always leaves it up to each individual believer to decide who he is on the basis of the evidence: "But you, who do you say that I am?" (Mt 16:15).

Jesus bases his reply on the prophecy in Isaiah 35:5-6 (the First Reading for this Sunday). Both his deeds ("what you see") and his teaching ("what you hear") are *signs* of his identity. Isaiah 35 is a prophecy of the Messianic age. Jesus points to this prophecy and to the fact that by his own ministry these signs have come about (eg. healing ten lepers in Matthew 8:1-4, the lame in 9:2-8, the dead in 9:23-26, the blind in 9:27-31, and the deaf mute in 9:32-34).

Among all these signs, the greatest is that the good news is proclaimed to the poor (cf. Isaiah 61:1). This proclamation is the very heart of Jesus' Messianic identity (cf. Lk 4:18-22, where the question of his identity also comes up).

Why does Jesus add: "Blessed is anyone who takes no offence at me;" literally, "who does not stumble at me" (cf. Mt 18:6-9)? It may be a reference to Isaiah 8:13-15 (cf. also Mt 21:42-44 and 1 Cor 1:23) where God himself is described as a "stumbling block" on whom many will stumble, and fall and be broken. If this is so, then Jesus' identity as the Messiah is precisely the judgment that John had prophesied. Those who cannot accept Jesus as "the One who is to come" – who take offence at him – will stumble and fall.

"There are three distinct comings of the Lord of which I know: his coming to men, his coming into men, and his coming against men."

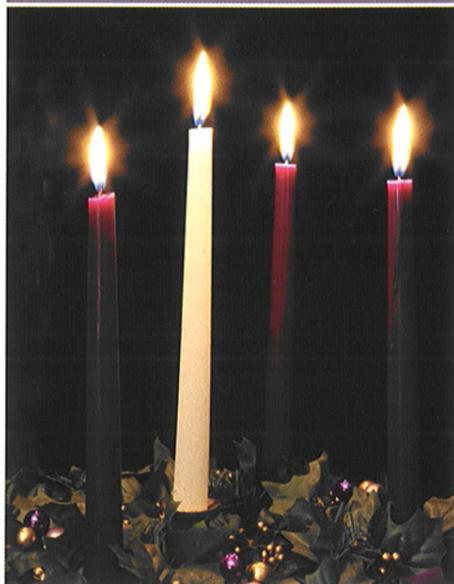
St Bernard of Clairvaux

After John's messengers have gone, Jesus puts the very same question of his identity to the crowd, via a discussion of the identity of John the Baptist himself. "What did you go out into the wilderness to look at?" It is a rhetorical question. They know the answer. They went out to see "a prophet". Jesus says they were correct, but that John was "more than a prophet" – he was the one predicted in Malachi 3:1-3, who would be a forerunner of the coming of the Lord God himself. So if John was the forerunner, and his task was to prepare the way for the coming of Jesus, then it is clear who Jesus is.

It is a good opportunity to reaffirm our faith in Jesus, the Messiah, the Son of God.

The Advent Wreath

In some churches it is the custom to set up an "Advent wreath" in or near the sanctuary. This may take the form of four large candles arranged amidst the greenery of a wreath or on candlesticks. A candle is lit to mark each of the four Sundays of the season so that the four are burning on the Fourth Sunday. Representing the four Sundays with three violet candles and one pink candle (for *Gaudete* Sunday) is customary. It is customary in some places for the wreath to be blessed on the First Sunday in Advent. (Bishop Peter Elliott, *Ceremonies of the Liturgical Year*).



From the Catechism of the Catholic Church

524 When the Church celebrates the liturgy of Advent each year, she makes present this ancient expectancy of the Messiah, for by sharing in the long preparation for the Saviour's first coming, the faithful renew their ardent desire for his second coming (Rev 22:17). By celebrating the precursor's birth and martyrdom, the Church unites herself to his desire: "He must increase, but I must decrease." (Jn 3:30).

