



HOMILY HELPS
Joy to the World - Christmas, 2009
Catholic Relief Services

Homily Helps were written by Msgr. Ralph Kuehner, a scripture scholar and social concerns activist in residence at St. Francis of Assisi parish in Derwood, Maryland. Msgr. Kuehner is author of *Living the Word* for lectionary cycles A, B & C (World Library Publications). Father Ralph is a long-time devoted friend to Catholic Relief Services.

THE FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT
November 29, 2009

Jer 33:14-16; Ps 25:4-5, 8-9, 10, 14; 1 Thes 3:12-4:2; Lk 21:25-28, 34-36

“Advent” is the Latin word for “coming,” a name that reminds the Christian that he should be preparing for the coming of Christ on Christmas Day. Interestingly, however, the readings of today’s liturgy highlight the Second Coming of our Savior. In the gospel Jesus predicts that at the end of time “they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory.” (Luke 21: 27)

In Christ’s description of that Second Coming in the Gospel of Matthew (15: 31 –46) he insists that his followers will be judged on whether they did or did not feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, welcome the stranger, clothe the naked, care for the ill, visit prisoners. Christ sees these acts of charity as done for him. “Amen I say to you, whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me.” (Matthew 25: 40) He adds, “What you did not do for one of these least ones, you did not do for me.” (Matthew 25:45)

In today’s second reading Paul encourages the Thessalonians and ultimately all Christians with these words, “May the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, just as we have for you, so as to strengthen your hearts, to be blameless in holiness before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his holy ones. Amen.” (1 Thessalonians 3: 12 – 13) Clearly the preparation for the Second Coming of Christ is abounding in love for all. There is no better preparation for receiving Jesus when he returns.

In view of this teaching of Christ and the Scriptures about the importance of love, it is so sad to realize that very, very many persons are not being reached by the love of their fellow human beings. There is, for example, the terrible fact that some 25,000 children die EVERY DAY from malnutrition. Catholic Relief Services works throughout the world to help meet this need of children and many other needs of the poor and vulnerable throughout the world.



THE SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT

December 6, 2009

Bar 5:1-9; Ps 126:1-2, 2-3, 4-5, 6; Phil 1:4-6, 8-11; Lk 3:1-6

“Prepare the way of the Lord” is clearly the theme for this Sunday’s liturgy. These words, taken from the prophet Isaiah, are put into the mouth of John the Baptist and express clearly the purpose of his ministry. All the followers of Jesus should follow the Baptist’s example by preparing for the coming of Christ on Christmas Day.

But it is also important that all Christians prepare for the Second Coming of Jesus. Saint Paul reminds the Philippians “that the one who began a good work in you will continue to complete it until the day of Christ Jesus.” (Philippians 1: 6) Paul’s prayer for his favorite community was that “you may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ.” (Philippians 1:10)

The prophet Baruch in today’s first reading encourages Jerusalem to prepare the way of the Lord, the day of the return of the exiles. Israel is asked to recall that God “is leading Israel in joy by the light of his glory, with his mercy and justice for company.” (Baruch 5: 9)

Justice is always important to God. The psalmist tells us that God “secures justice for the oppressed, gives food to the hungry. The Lord sets prisoners free; the Lord gives sight to the blind. The Lord raises up those who are bowed down;...the Lord protects the stranger, sustains the orphan and the widow.” (Psalm 146: 7 – 9)

In the midst of these great justice actions of God the reader is told, “The Lord loves the righteous.” (Psalm 146: 8) In other words, God loves those who continue his work of justice, reaching out to the poor and the needy, the stranger, the oppressed, the orphan and widow. This is the work of Catholic Relief Services (CRS) in more than 100 countries throughout the world – a work that God surely loves. The importance of the work of CRS is made absolutely clear when we know that about half the world –over three billion people – live on less than \$2.50 a day.



THE THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT

December 13, 2009

Zep 3:14-18a; Is 12:2-3, 4, 5-6; Phil 4:4-7; Lk 3:10-18

John the Baptist is a key person in salvation history. He is the final prophet of the Old Testament and announces the coming of Jesus to start the New Testament.

The people of Israel had been without a prophet for four hundred years and so they had a real devotion to the Baptist. He was steadfast in proclaiming his mission of preparing for “one mightier than I,” (Luke 3: 16) Jesus of Nazareth. John asked the people to prepare for the Messiah by *metanoia*, which means literally in the Greek “a change of mind.” In the context of the Baptist’s ministry it can be translated as “a reformation of one’s life.”

The Jewish historian, Josephus, in his *Antiquities* attests to the popularity of John, but also to the meaning of his baptism. “Indeed, it seemed to John that even this washing [baptism] would not be acceptable as a pardon for sins, but only as a purification of the body, unless the soul had previously been cleansed through upright conduct.” In other words, John wants reform of life on the part of his followers.

In today’s Gospel the Baptist gives some specific advice to those who approach him, the crowds, the tax collectors, the soldiers. His words indicate the importance of both justice and service to be truly in harmony with the will of God.

These same qualities are essential, but often lacking in our modern world. Many are treated unjustly; many do not get the help they need to survive. For example, some 1.1 billion people in developing countries, such as Haiti, have inadequate access to water, and 2.6 billion lack basic sanitation. “Reformation of life,” expressed by acts of justice and service, is needed badly by many individuals, by many countries on a very large scale!

“Catholic Relief Services carries out the commitment of the Bishops of the United States to assist the poor and vulnerable overseas.”



THE FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT
December 20, 2009

Mi 5:1-4a; Ps 80:2-3, 15-16, 18-19; Heb 10:5-10; Lk 1:39-45

As Christmas approaches, it is not surprising that today's readings highlight the role of Mary and her Child. The prophet Micah portrays the child of "she who is to give birth" (5: 2) as a king, a shepherd and as peace, the fullness, perfection of God's blessings.

In the Gospel Luke highlights two major aspects of Mary and her role in salvation history. Elizabeth tells her cousin, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb." (1: 42) She also has a second beatitude concerning Mary, "Blessed are you who believed that what was spoken to you by the Lord would be fulfilled." (1: 45) While being the mother of Jesus was something completely unique to the Blessed Virgin, being a believer is essential for all God's children.

These two blessings of Mary appear again in the public life of Jesus. A woman in the crowd surrounding Christ "called out and said, 'Blessed is the womb that carried you and the breast at which you nursed.'" (11: 27) Again, as with Elizabeth, the words reflect the unique fact of Mary's being the mother Jesus. But Christ's response was, "Rather blessed are those who hear the word of God and observe it." (11: 28) Luke expects the reader to recall the words of Elizabeth about the faith of Mary and especially the response of Mary to the angel Gabriel, "I am the handmaid of the Lord. May it be done to be according to your word." (1: 38) Mary is truly a woman of faith, the first and greatest disciple of her Son. Everyone should follow her example.

Hearing the word of God and observing it demands following the teachings of Jesus, especially love of God and love of neighbor. There can be no exceptions to the love of neighbor. Our Lord even insists, "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you." (6: 27)

Despite the clear and insistent demand of Jesus to love one's neighbor there are so many indications that his words are not being followed. As we read today of Mary and her Child, it is sad to realize that 2.2 million children die every year because they are not immunized. This is just one of the many very disturbing facts about global poverty. Thankfully part of the mission of Catholic Relief Services is to "promote human development by responding to major emergencies, fighting disease and poverty, and nurturing peaceful and just societies."