



SCRIPTURE REFLECTIONS ON SOCIAL JUSTICE

ADVENT 2023

Week 1

Scripture Reflections on Social Justice for Advent 2023

Introduction

The following is a collection of Scripture reflections on Social Justice for Advent 2023 based on the liturgical readings of the day. St. Bernard of Clairvaux says there are three comings — three Advents. First, the Advent that prepares us for the celebration or commemoration of the first coming of Christ to Israel at Christmas. Second, the coming of Jesus at the end of time. Third, the coming between the first two in which Jesus comes in spirit and power to make us wholly. In case anyone should think that St. Bernard of Clairvaux was making things up, listen to what Jesus himself says: “If anyone loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him” (John. 14.23).

The Scripture reflections on Social Justice for Advent 2023 are structured as follows: First, there is a short extract or verse from one of the readings for the day, pertinent to Social Justice. This is then followed by a short reflection on the excerpt through the lens of social justice. We will make mention of the principles of Catholic Social Teaching to support our reflections where appropriate. Then at the end, we have a short prayer, asking God for the grace to deepen the insights of the readings and reflections. Scripture readings are taken from the New Revised Standard Version Catholic Edition. The choice of excerpts is dictated by the themes of Social Justice and the Catholic Social Teaching of the Church. The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops’ website identifies seven themes of Catholic Social Teaching: 1. Life and Dignity of the Human Person, 2. Call to Family, Community, and Participation, 3. Rights and Responsibilities, 4. Option for the Poor and Vulnerable, 5. The Dignity of Work and the Rights of Workers, 6. Solidarity and 7. Care for God’s Creation.



**St. Bernard of
Clairvaux**

Advent Week One

Day 1: Sunday, 3 December 2023

First Reading: Isaiah 63:16b–17, 19b; 64:2–7

Psalm: 80:2–3, 15–16, 18–19

2nd Reading: 1 Corinthians 1:3–9

Gospel: Mark 13:33–37

Doing Justice by Walking in God's Path



Scripture Passage

You meet those who gladly do right, those who remember you in your ways. But you were angry, and we sinned; because you hid yourself, we transgressed (Isaiah 64:5).

Reflection

The world we live in is wrapped in turmoil, especially with two major wars of Ukraine-Russia and the Hamas-Israel war. No one can un-see the horrors unleashed on our small screens on a daily basis. Advent is an opportune time to reflect on the horror of humanity's inhumanity. A Jewish journalist, Eva Wiseman, writing for the *Guardian* has this to say:

Divisiveness is all I see right now — society is like a broken mirror. Reality is distorting under the weight of fragmenting identities (The Guardian (26 November 2023), "The awful horror of the Hamas-Israel war is creating deep divisions close to home").

Advent is a time of hope. It is a time to renew our humanity in keeping with the Christian tradition that teaches that human dignity must be protected and the Catholic Social Teaching that through solidarity we are one human family, whatever our national, racial, ethnic, economic, and ideological differences. A healthy community can only be achieved if human rights are protected and responsibilities are met. Today our Scripture excerpt comes from the third part of the book of the prophet Isaiah whose name means "God is Salvation." The prophet Isaiah was an upbeat person despite the fraught geopolitics of his day. In order for us to tap into his hope, we need the Spirit of God.

Prayer

Spirit of God, Spirit of Justice, infuse yourself into our hearts. Divisiveness is all we see around us. May your Spirit, remind us of our common humanity. May we gladly do social justice so that righteousness will be the belt around the waist and faithfulness the belt around the loin.

Advent Week One

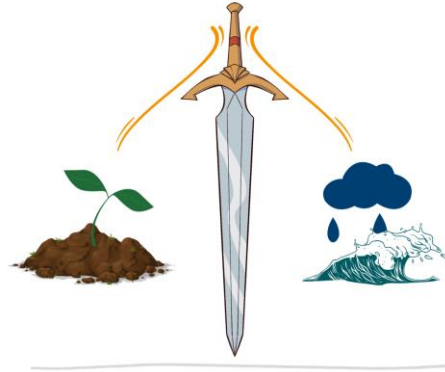
Day 2: Monday, 4 December 2023

1st Reading: Isaiah 2:1–5

Psalm: 122:1–2, 3–4b, 4cd–5, 6–7, 8–9

Gospel: Matthew 8:5–11

Beating our swords into plowshares and our spears into pruning hooks



Scripture Passage

They shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more (Isaiah 2:4bc).

Reflection

In 2009, Benjamin Netanyahu gave a speech at Bar Ilan University near Tel Aviv in which set out the conditions for the formation of a Palestinian state. He ended his speech by quoting from the above vision of Isaiah:

Let us realise the vision of the prophet Isaiah, who in Jerusalem 2,700 years ago said: “nation shall not lift up sword against nation, and they shall learn war no more.” With God’s help, we will know no more war. We will know peace.

These words could not be in sharper contrast with his subsequent reflections, when on 7 October 2023 he declared:

Citizens of Israel, we are at war. Not an operation, not a round at war! This morning Hamas initiated a murderous surprise attack against the state of Israel and its citizens.

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Perhaps humanity's failure to "beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks" has something to do with our failure to be friends, which is at the root of our English word, society. As Pope John XXIII put it:

When society is formed on a basis of rights and duties, [people] have an immediate grasp of spiritual and intellectual values, and have no difficulty in understanding what is meant by truth, justice, charity and freedom (John XXIII, Pacem in Terris, 11 April 1963: par 45).

We cannot achieve this by our own efforts. We need the Spirit of truth, justice, charity and freedom.

Prayer

Spirit of truth, justice, charity and freedom, remove our hearts of stone and replace them with hearts of flesh. Help us to be true friends to one another by beating our swords into plowshares and our spears into pruning hooks.

Day 3: Tuesday, 5 December 2023

1st Reading: Isaiah 11:1–10

Psalm: 72:1–2, 7–8, 12–13, 17

Gospel: Luke 10:21–24

The Poor of Yahweh Shall Inherit the Earth



Scripture Passage

But with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth (Isaiah 11:4a).

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Reflection

Today's excerpt above from Isaiah focuses on the poor. Before we begin to split hermeneutical hairs between the economically poor and the poor in spirit, it is important to note that the economically poor have a special place in God's heart. According to the World Bank, "Half of the global population lives on less than US \$6.85 per person per day." This is a shocking statistic if you consider that the price of a pint of lager in the UK is GBP £6.90 [US \$8.76]. That is to say, most of the global South live on less than a pint of lager per day.

Isaiah looks to the Messianic times here on earth and assures the meek, the poor and the downtrodden that the Messiah will adjudicate them with justice. This preferential option for the poor is carried from the Hebrew Bible to the Christian Bible when Jesus was setting out the requirements for the Kingdom of God, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5:3). But who are the poor? They are those who, whether economically poor as in Luke or "the poor in spirit" who recognize their need for God. Like Abraham, they swear by the experience of Abraham, "God will provide" here on earth. This is a lesson more easily understood by those who are struggling economically.

Prayer

Remember us, Compassionate One, with the favour that you show those who are poor, meek and downtrodden. Visit us with your salvation; that we may savour the banquet you prepare for us. And if it pleases you to grace us with material wealth, may we use it for the greater good.

Day 4: Wednesday, 6 December 2023

1st Reading: Isaiah 25:6–10a

Psalm: 23:1–3a, 3b–4, 5, 6

Gospel: Matthew 15:29–37

The Mountain or Hill of the Lord we all have to climb



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Scripture Passage

On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear. And he will destroy on this mountain the shroud that is cast over all peoples, the sheet that is spread over all nations (Isaiah 25:6–7).

Reflection

Wined and dined, what more could you ask for? Sceptics are tempted to dismiss the vision as pie in the sky but Isaiah's banquet is for all in the here and now but we have to allow God to remove the shroud or sheet that prevents us. In very broad strokes we might say that this is anything that prevents us from practicing justice as the right relationship between self, others, God and nature and this may differ from one person to the other. Through her poem, "The Hill We Climb," Amanda Gorman, shares a similar vision.

Scripture tells us to envision that everyone shall sit under their own vine and fig tree and no one should make them afraid. If we're to live up to our own time, then victory won't lie in the blade, but in in all of the bridges we've made.

During this Advent, we especially commit ourselves to building more bridges of harmony.

Prayer

Universal Spirit, bring us to your Holy Mountain to savour your banquet of victory over all the forces of evil. Let all religions and none agree that we are one family. As one family may we see the whole earth as our common home. May you remove the veils that prevent us from living in perfect harmony with ourselves, others, you and the rest of creation.

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Day 5: Thursday, 7 December 2023

1st Reading: Isaiah 26:1–6

Psalm: 118:1, 8–9, 19–21, 25–27a

Gospel: Matthew 7:21, 24–27

If you want Peace, Work for Social Justice



Scripture Passage

Those of steadfast mind you keep in peace [*Shalom*] — in peace [*Shalom*] because they trust in you (Isaiah 26:3).

Reflection

Isaiah loves to use the word peace or in his own language, *Shalom*. The English translation “peace” does not quite catch it because peace is often construed as the absence of conflict or war but in Hebrew, the verb *Shalam* which gives us the noun *Shalom* meant “to make something whole.” Not just regarding practical restoration of things that were lost or stolen but a sense of fulness or completeness in mind, body and soul. You have to agree that is a rather rare commodity. That is what Isaiah prays for and that is what we too strive for. In Israel today, when you greet someone or say goodbye, you say, “*Shalom*.” You are literally saying, “May you be full of well-being” or “May health and prosperity be upon you.” On the Sabbath day you add, *Shabat Shalom*. On 1 January 1972, Pope Paul VI reminded the world, “If you want Peace, work for Justice” (Message of His Holiness Pope Paul VI, 1 January 1972). It is this nexus of justice and peace that we seek.

Prayer

Eternal Spirit, help us to seek to build evangelizing communities of faith, justice, and solidarity, where all believers and none are challenged to bring God’s love, justice, and peace to a world in desperate need of the seasoning of the Gospel.

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Day 6: Friday, 8 December 2023 — Feast of the Immaculate Conception

1st Reading: Genesis 3:9–15, 20

Psalm: 98:1, 2–3ab, 3cd–4

Gospel: Luke 1:26–38

Mary and Jesus — Servants of Yahweh and Servant-Leaders



Scripture Passage

Then Mary said, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word” (Luke 1.38).

Reflection

The biblical figure of the Servant of Yahweh first emerges in the book of Isaiah through four “Servant Songs” [Isaiah 42:1–9; 49:1–13; 50:4–11; and 52:13—53:12.] that describe the service, suffering, and exaltation of an enigmatic figure. All four songs show God’s meek, humble and gentle envoy on a special liberating mission. Whether a royal, prophetic or kingly figure, they represent Israel in its ideal form. Ultimately, this Servant of Yahweh would deliver the world from sin and death in the person of Jesus. In royal terminology of the ancient Near East, a servant was a “trusted envoy,” a “confidential representative,” or “one who is chosen.” Writing in a patriarchal culture, Luke would never have got away with referring to Mary as the Servant of Yahweh. But writing in Greek, he does exactly that by having Mary refer to herself as the *He Doulē Kyriou* [The Servant of the Lord].

Mary and Jesus model Servant-Leadership, which prioritizes growth, well-being, and empowerment of the governed or led and fosters inclusivity, enabling everyone to thrive as their authentic selves. Whereas traditional top-down leadership focuses on the bottom-line, servant leadership puts people first. When implemented correctly, servant leadership can help foster trust, accountability, growth, and inclusion, whether in the Church or wider society. During this Advent, we pray that all our leaders become Servant-Leaders.

Prayer

Mary and Jesus, Servants of Yahweh, may we emulate your example so that we may fully realise the gifts you have given us to be faithful images of God’s presence at work in our lives as servant-leaders.

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Day 7: Saturday, 9 December 2023

1st Reading: Isaiah 30:19–21, 23–26

Psalms: 147:1–2, 3–4, 5–6

Gospel: Matthew 9:35–10:1, 5a, 6–8

Putting People First in Leadership



Scripture Passage

When [Jesus] saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd (Matthew 9:36).

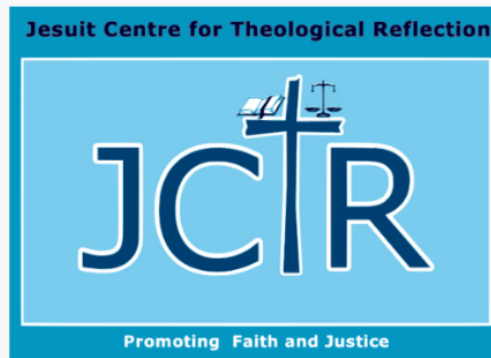
In Zambia, a discussion is currently all the rage, due to a pastoral letter published by the Zambia Conference of Catholic Bishops [ZCCB] entitled, “Hear O My People I will Admonish You,” read on Friday 10 November 2023 by the Vice President of ZCCB, the Rt Rev Charles Kasonde. The bone of contention is paragraph 1.1 on “shrinking of democratic space.” It is a pity the Zambian bishops do not offer an in-depth socio-political analysis of this phenomenon which seems borrowed from Civil Society Organisations, running the risk of appearing to rubber-stamp opposition party views. But the Zambian bishops give the following evidence and they are spot on.

Human rights such as freedom of expression and freedom of assembly are arbitrarily being trampled on, especially against those considered to hold dissenting political views or persons belonging to opposition parties (10 November 2023, “Hear O My People I will Admonish You,” par. 1.1).

The Scripture excerpt at the head of this reflection sums up global socio-political disquiet. Ultimately, it is the ordinary citizens who suffer “because they [are] harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.” The rub here is not that the people are harassed because they always will be, but that the people lack selfless and authentic shepherds or servant-leaders, both in the Church and in the wider society. There is a global dearth of compassionate and courageous leaders who put the people they serve first.

Prayer

Compassionate Spirit, where you have given us the opportunity to lead, whether in the workplace, family, Church, or the wider community, may we seek the greater good. Give us compassionate hearts for those whom we lead. May we desire their best, even if it costs us.



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