

Monday December 14th, Monday in the Third Week in Advent

Good Morning from St. Bernadette's.

I hope everyone is keeping safe and well, and following all the guidance we receive to overcome these strange times, and continuing to pray for all our needs at this time.

Well it was lovely to celebrate Gaudete Sunday, especially in the new rose vestment (and I have two more celebrations of it), and I'm pleased to hear that the live stream went well, so we seem to be doing something right. It was also good to have a stream of people coming in for private prayer before the Blessed Sacrament. Many thanks for the stewards who continue to make that possible. At least one of the Christmas Masses will also be live streamed – and that's only in eleven days time!

For the next two days we move away from Isaiah. Today we hear two oracles from the Book of Numbers. These are very consoling because they both speak of a great leader who is to come to the house of Israel. All the people are to have this air of expectancy for their saviour. *'How fair your dwellings, Israel. A hero arises from their stock, he reigns over countless people.'* As we read Numbers 24:2-7.15-17 we try to imbibe this spirit too as we look forward to the coming of Christ at Christmas.

For the next three days we still hear of John the Baptiser and his work of preparing the way. In Matthew 21:23-27 the chief priests and elders tried to ensnare Jesus, but he turned the tables on them by asking them what they thought of the work of John. He condemns them for their spiritual blindness - if they had read the scriptures they would know who he was, and they would know about John's mission to prepare the way for him.

*O God,
you raised up St. John the Baptist
to prepare a perfect people for Christ.
Fill Your people with the joy of possessing His grace,
and direct the minds of all faithful in the way of peace and salvation.
Grant that St. John was martyred for truth and justice,
so we may energetically profess our Faith in You,
and lead others to the Way, the Truth, and Eternal Life.
Through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

And today we celebrate Saint John of the Cross. Born in 1542 in Spain, St. John of the Cross grew up in poverty and was drawn to the contemplative life. His soul longed for mystical union with God that

his piety offended members of his order, including its head. The turning point of his life came in 1567 when he met Teresa of Avila, a kindred spirit who was looking for a partner in her Carmelite reform movement. She appointed him prior of the first community of discalced friars. Later, he served as a spiritual director at her convent.

John wrote: *'Contemplation is nothing else but a secret, peaceful, and loving infusion of God, which if admitted, will set the soul on fire with the Spirit of love.'* His life was not without difficulties, as even members of his own order objected to the reforms he wished to put in place, and in 1577, he was imprisoned for nine months by his own brethren, during which he wrote about his 'dark night of the soul.' On December 14, 1591, just before midnight, John of the Cross was dying. He wanted to make up his bed in case anyone would come to visit him. He asked to have 'Song of Songs' read to him and while listening, he was heard to say, 'So beautiful are the flowers!' And then he died in 1591 at the age of just 49. This is one of his prayers, known as the 'Peace Prayer.' and it seems very appropriate for these strange times:

O Blessed Jesus,

grant me stillness of soul in Thee.

Let Thy mighty calmness reign in me.

Rule me, O thou King of gentleness, King of peace.

Give me control, control over my words, thoughts and actions.

From all irritability, want of meekness, want of gentleness,

O dear Lord, deliver me.

By thine own deep patience give me patience, stillness of soul in Thee.

Make me in this, and in all, more and more like Thee. Amen.

All this talk of John the Baptist in the Advent scriptures reminds me of when I did my whistle stop tour of the Holy Land a few years ago. We stopped off and had lunch on the banks of the River Jordan, at the shrine where Christ is said to have been baptised by John the Baptist. I bought a bottle of Jordan water, and every time I replenish the water in the font I always add a little so that I can say to families at a baptism that it contains your actual Jordan water. It was a beautiful place, very atmospheric, as I hope you can see in the attached couple of pictures.

Why did John the Baptist take his sandals off before he got into the River Jordan? Because he wanted to save soles. Well that joke is ripe for a Christmas Cracker...

Hope the start of this third week of Advent is going well.

Once again many thanks for all your return mails. Apologies if I don't reply immediately, sometimes they seem to get lost (or kind of bunched up). Any suggestions for ways to keep our faith and spirits up at this time are most welcome!

And remember, St. Bernadette's is not closed. We're just doing things differently for a while, until we are allowed to gather together once more, more stronger, more faithful, more loving, more creative, and more grateful for the amazing community that is St. Bernadette's.

With love and faith in Jesus.

Fr. P.