



## Reflections on Advent and Christmas

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The prayer of Azariah (Dan. 3:24 ff.) while he and his two friends are in the fiery furnace, captured my attention. It well describes the situation of the Church in our times:

“For we, O Lord, have become fewer than any other nation,  
and are brought low this day in all the world because of our sins.  
In our day we have no ruler, or prophet, or leader,  
no burnt offering, or sacrifice, or oblation, or incense,  
no place to make an offering before you and to find mercy.  
Yet with a contrite heart and a humble spirit may we be accepted, as though it were with  
burnt offerings, such may our sacrifice be in your sight today.”

This prayer instills in my heart a deep sense of longing for forgiveness and hope. I had a similar experience in Africa while I was on my way to Tamanrasset, in the barren Sahara Desert. While sleeping in the tent, strange noises could be heard from outside. When I asked my Tuareg guide, he answered: “It’s the desert that cries!”. “For what?” I retorted. “For not being the garden that it used to be.” It was a poetical interpretation of a physical phenomenon: the difference in temperature between day (117-122 F) and night that causes the cracking of the stones, thus, the noises.

The “crying of the desert” well describes my feelings during this Advent Season, that is coming to its close. Advent makes our thirst for God more acute, while we experience a deep nostalgia for our lost innocence. It was the innocence of the child who smiles at anyone approaching it, even people who intend to harm it. Its smile disarms us. As adults we have learned to be on our guard, to be ‘prudent’ with our trust, we have learned that evil exists, buried deep in our hearts. This sad realization makes us implore: "Oh, that you tear up the heavens and come down!" "Come, Lord!"

The joyful realization that at Christmas our invocation is answered feels us with JOY: Christ is born among us and for us.

The romantic vein of these days of celebration must not make us forget the great importance of this celebration: “God who becomes man, to make man God!”

Unlike other religious traditions, where humanity searches for God, in Christianity it is God who searches for humanity. The first question, in fact, that God asks in the history of humanity is short, simple: "Adam where are you?" God seems to ask us: “My creature, my image, I created you for joy. For you and for your joy, I created this splendid garden, why do you run away from me? It's true, you stretched out your hand to eat the fruit of death, but I, who am life, can and want to heal you! "

The answer of Adam is heartbreaking: "I was ashamed of you and afraid because I'm naked." He expresses the sense of guilt that entraps our heart. The long search of God for the estranged started.

In search of man God becomes man, one of us: "And the Word became flesh and pitched his tent among us" it means, in plain words, that: "The frailty of men is the place that God wants to inhabit.”

God, as the ‘good shepherd’ in the Gospel, descended to earth in search of his lost sheep. He kept looking for it even in Hell itself. In the ‘Apostolic Creed,’ in fact, we proclaim: "He descended into the Underworld" where humanity is still prisoner in a personal Hell created by our repeated sins.

God knows that, beyond the masks we wear, we carry within us a void that only the Divine can fill, a widespread discontent that has no exact name, a sort of lucid despair from feeling alone in a world bigger than us.

At Christmas, we hear the angel announcing to the shepherds: "I announce to you a great joy, which will be for all the people: today a Savior is born to you": every time we welcome Jesus we can return to joy. Joy is not a feeling, but a Person, it has a name and a face: Jesus of Nazareth.

Ever since God became flesh in Mary's womb, the only way we have is to love and serve this wounded, painful, irritating humanity that contains Jesus Christ who hides in its depths. We serve this humanity by practicing the traditional the fourteen 'Works of mercy.'

We are made able to love because we have experienced love. God 'became one of us' so that we can become 'God', loving as He loves, i.e., "Becoming merciful as He is merciful." God, in fact, "makes the sun rise over good people and bad people alike, the rain falls on good and bad alike," because for God actions are good or bad, but, for God, people are always good, even when they do bad things, because people are simply misled, "they don't know what they are doing."

Even if restrictions and hardships caused by the COVID-19 pandemic await us this year we learn that God is not yet tired of loving us, of trusting us, of offering us forgiveness and peace. God's Son, Jesus, the greatest demonstration of love that the Father has ever given to the world.

Christmas is the first of four manifestations of God's love for us (theophanies):

- Nativity, -
- Epiphany, -
- Baptism of Jesus,
- Wedding of Cana.

They have been grouped together in one of the Church hymns:

Today the Bridegroom claims his bride, the Church, since Christ has washed her sins away in Jordan's waters; the Magi hasten with their gifts to the royal wedding; and the wedding guests rejoice, for Christ has changed water into wine, alleluia. This is also so in the antiphon for the canticle at evening prayer:

Three mysteries mark this holy day: today the star leads the Magi to the infant Christ; today water is changed into wine for the wedding feast; today Christ wills to be baptized by John in the river Jordan to bring us salvation.

