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GAZING ON  
THE GOSPELS  
YEAR A

*Meditations on the Lectionary readings*



Judith Dimond



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# Contents



<i>Acknowledgements</i>	vi
<i>Introduction</i>	vii
Advent	1
Christmas	11
Epiphany	19
Ordinary Time	29
Lent	41
Easter	55
Ordinary Time	73
Sundays before Advent	121

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# Introduction

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In her Fourth Letter to Agnes, St Clare of Assisi described Jesus as a ‘mirror without blemish’. Just imagine how marvellous such a mirror would have seemed in the twelfth century. Before the advent of glass mirrors, all reflections were plagued by distortions. As a rich young woman, before her conversion, Clare must have gazed in many a flawed mirror, just as teenage girls and boys do today, spending hours looking at themselves, questioning and rehearsing their identity. As Sister Clare, what she wanted for her followers was for them to capture in prayer that intense concentration, yet without the vanity. For the mirror she called us all to gaze into reveals to us Christ, and ourselves only as seen in him.

At some points in her writing, St Clare lets the verbs tumble over each other in her insistence – ponder, see, contemplate, look, consider: she repeats them again and again. In her Second Letter, Clare leaves us with a clearer instruction:

*Gaze  
Consider  
Contemplate  
As you desire to imitate him*

And it is this structure that is followed in these reflections on the weekly Gospels of the Revised Common Lectionary.

Using Clare’s template allows us the chance to be stimulated through our senses, through our feelings and our minds, and through our hearts, so engaging the whole person in the act of prayerful study. The purpose behind these reflections is to provoke readers to ask themselves: what does this story stimulate in me today? What might it mean to others outside my own small circle? I have tried to make each piece appropriately personal, yet accessible. More than anything, I want to link the sacred and the secular, or rather to demolish the

## Introduction

false dichotomy we so often impose – perhaps we hope that way to keep the gospel safe, and reduce its power in the world.

Though Year A is the first in the lectionary, this volume is the last of the cycle to be written. But the value of any cycle is that it is circular, as is the value of the teaching of St Clare, who always returns us to Jesus, yet keeps us involved in our own relationships and responsibilities. ‘God’s love is never closed in upon itself’ (Claire Marie Ledoux, *Clare of Assisi: Her Spirituality Revealed in Her Letters*, trans. Colette Joly Dees, Cincinnati, OH: St Anthony Messenger Press, 2003).

The image of the mirror speaks of a kind of infectious spirituality, in which what is seen in prayer, in gazing, in contemplation, effects a transformation in the life of the one who gazes, so that others may be drawn by what they see in her to their own contemplation, and to their own transformation.

(Helen Julian CSF, *Living the Gospel*,  
Abingdon: Bible Reading Fellowship, 2001)

If we have truly gazed, considered and contemplated the good news, we will surely be compelled to change, and so the final prayer of each piece will often challenge us to action in imitation of Jesus. It is no coincidence that the four Gospels of the New Testament are followed immediately by *The Acts* of the Apostles. The true value of these reflections must be measured by the degree to which they have provoked, nudged or encouraged us to imitate our Lord.

# ADVENT

# *The First Sunday of Advent*

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*Matthew 24.36–44*

*Gaze* on Noah – who is this man? Though he’s a righteous person, he’s by no means perfect, as we discover after the flood subsides – for the last time we see him, he is drunk and naked! But we are told he ‘walked with God’. Like Mary, mother of Jesus millennia later, he is God’s chosen instrument. And like Mary, Noah is obedient. He listens to God’s absurdly detailed instructions for the building of the Ark and doesn’t protest that he knows very well how to put together a watertight boat, and why is God being so particular? He listens to God’s judgement on the peoples of the world without a murmur of defence. He doesn’t argue with God’s harshness or ask ‘why me?’ We are told that ‘Noah did everything just as God commanded him’.

And what is more, he did it speedily. Noah becomes our first example of staying awake, trustful and obedient to God.

*Consider* how, after the Nativity, the story of Noah is probably the most popular to tell to children. Look at all the pretty picture books and jigsaws, models and felt toys of the animals which we give to our children to play with. But the procession of delightful animals two by two, and the pretty rainbow are the ‘happy ending’. The story begins when we hear God’s discovery that humankind’s ‘heart was only evil . . . [for] . . . all people of the earth had corrupted their ways . . . and the earth is filled with violence’ (Genesis 6.5, 12, 13). As it still is today.

Consider how this gospel reading for the first Sunday of the year is a warning which shows us Jesus in as stern a mood as God in Genesis. We are not allowed to ease ourselves gently into the new liturgical year, nor are we allowed to drift cheerfully to Christmas. We are warned of catastrophe and destruction and an almost random

judgement. There is no reference to God's love or compassionate nature. We cannot avoid this element of threat within the Gospel, and must wrestle with its meaning.

But we know that those who listened to Jesus telling the beginning of Noah's story also knew the end. Consider God's words to Noah when the flood had subsided and he came out of the Ark: 'Never again will I curse the ground because of man, *even though* every inclination of his heart is evil from childhood' (Genesis 8.21). In other words, God does not pretend that this 'second' creation is any better than the first. We are not improved by the flood, but God is resolved to love us in our weakness and corruption. And so he establishes his first covenant with humankind, and the rainbow as its sign.

Consider how at the beginning of Advent we look forward to the New Covenant, where a star will be the sign in the heavens, just as the rainbow was the sign of the First Covenant.

We do not know if we would have been in Noah's family, safe in the ark, or left to drown in the deluge. Nor do we know which of the two men or women in the field we will be. But we can stay awake, obedient and trusting, as Noah did.

*Contemplate* a waiting that is mixed with dread, just as Noah waited for the flood. Contemplate a waiting filled with excitement and hope, just as Noah waited for the dove to return. Contemplate how similar yet how different the feelings of dread and excitement are. Note how both have equal prominence in the stories ahead of us this year. A dread which is born of a world out of joint with God's will, and an excitement born out of God's promises that he will rescue us.

*As you desire to imitate him*

My God and my Judge, may I walk through the days of Advent  
Obedient and trusting as Noah,  
With a listening which is also an act of obedience,  
A wakefulness that is also a prayer,  
Always living my life in hopeful expectation  
Of the Second Coming.  
Amen.

## *The Second Sunday of Advent*

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*Matthew 3.1–12*

*Gaze* on harvest time in ancient Canaan: the whole community must work hard together to bring in the grain. First the men cut down the ripened grain, gripping their hand sickles till they get blisters. Then the women must bind the barley or wheat into sheaves, much like those we used to see in our fields, before those ugly black plastic wraps became commonplace. Watch them bending and straightening, bending and straightening, mopping their brows in the warm air.

Then the grain is carted back to the open air threshing floor, where it is loosened from the straw, sometimes by the heavy tread of cattle. The site has been specially chosen because it is exposed to the prevailing winds. By now, it is late afternoon, and the breeze has risen in time for the grain to be winnowed. Up in the air they toss the grain, straining their shoulders, so that the wind will blow away the straw and chaff, leaving the heavier grain at the winnower's feet. This is the grain that they can use; this is the grain that is good.

The wind is vital to this operation, for without it, the good grain could not be collected. John the Baptist is telling us this is just like the Holy Spirit, not always gentle and mild, but sifting, and judging. For the last job of the harvest was to burn the chaff.

*Consider* how glibly we use the metaphor of the wheat and the chaff when we want to judge others, and divide them into the 'approved' and the 'disapproved'. In today's Old Testament lesson, from Isaiah, we heard how, when God's plans reach fulfilment, the lion and the ox, the bear and the cow, the wolf and the lamb, and the leopard and the kid, will all lie down together. So we learn that God's plan is for the kingdom of heaven to be inclusive. God does not choose

to exclude us, but so often, we exclude ourselves by thinking we are better than others, or purer, or more righteous. Just like the Pharisees and the Sadducees, in fact. Consider how God is teaching that we must be prepared to share the kingdom with unlikely bedfellows.

Consider how John, in common with all prophets, meant his message to be for us as a community, as well as individuals. It is often the collective choices made by a society which show our real values. We cannot blame the economic crisis of 2009 on a few bankers; we must be honest about our complicity and repent. We cannot hide behind our church membership and say we didn't subscribe to greed. What did we actually do to change people's hearts and minds? 'Do not think you can say to yourselves, "We have Abraham as our father"' (Matthew 3.9), said John.

*Contemplate* how short Advent is. We have only four weeks to prepare for the kingdom. But if we had longer, would we be any more prepared? Sense the urgency in this reading. We are told to repent now.

Contemplate how you are preparing for Christmas: when you write your cards, do you dash them off in a hurry without a thought for the person you are sending them to? Or do you think of each person in turn, and contemplate what they mean in your life, and how they have played a part in your life's journey, and give thanks?

*As you desire to imitate him*

Dear Lord, help me to prepare for your coming  
By making space and staying still.  
Help me to prepare by honest examination of myself.  
Help me to lift my face to the wind of your Spirit  
And be prepared for your judgement.  
Amen.

# *The Third Sunday of Advent*



*Matthew 11.2–11*

*Gaze* on John's disciples. We don't know their names, but we can imagine a group a little like the disciples that Jesus chose, all shapes and sizes, and drawn from all walks of life. They are a faithful band who have shared with him the rigours of the desert and the sternness of his message, and not been put off. They have hoped great things of him, and even thought he might be Elijah, or even 'the one to come' himself. But John has always insisted otherwise, and pointed away from himself, towards another.

And now John is in prison, and it looks as if his purposes are doomed, along with John himself. John seems to weaken, and doubts himself, for now he sends his disciples off to Jesus. Before he dies, as he fears he will, he's desperate to know if the struggle has all been worthwhile. Watch the disciples meet with Jesus. What is going on in their heads? They must be thinking, what's so special about this man? Can he be the one John has predicted? Will he be any more reliable than John?

*Consider* how Jesus doesn't start with promises or predictions, but with evidence based on how he is fulfilling the words of another prophet, namely Isaiah. And then he goes on to reaffirm John in the mind of his disciples, for he tells them to carry on with their support of him, and he insists he was indeed a truly great prophet – not a reed bending in the wind, but someone upright and unyielding. So he confirms their loyalty to John and eases their confusion, and their fear that his life may have been in vain.

Consider how important it is in all our lives to know that what we set out to do was worthwhile, and that we have not chased after a dream. Or rather, that the dream was a worthy one. Consider the

difference between a dream which is merely a wish, and a dream that is a vision. Our wishes may be trivial hopes, not relevant to ourselves or appropriate to our lives. How I wish I could ski, or sing a church solo – they chop and change from day to day. Our visions must be stronger than these, based on our ideals and our values, and rooted in God's word, able to sustain us through challenges.

*Contemplate* what is the dream that dominates your life. Is your dream rooted in the kingdom of heaven? If so, no fame or fortune will be necessary to make your heart glad, for you can count upon being as great as John the Baptist himself; or as insignificant.

And if your dream is rooted in Christ, no imprisonment or persecution will be a stumbling block. And you will be prepared to wait with faith for the dawning of the kingdom.

*As you desire to imitate him*

Dear Lord, may I have the strength of John the Baptist  
To withstand persecution.  
May I share John's vision  
And see the signs and preach the way.  
Then grant me his humility,  
So that I accept the part you would have me play,  
However small, in the coming of the kingdom.  
Amen.

# *The Fourth Sunday of Advent*



*Matthew 1.18–25*

*Gaze* on Joseph, the day his world turns upside down. It's just like a TV soap – the cheated husband, the penitent wife, and the shocked neighbours. Though inside Joseph must have been furious, he doesn't seem the type to rant and rave. Angry and hurt, his first thought must have been that she had been unfaithful.

Gaze on him pacing up and down the hillside around Nazareth, refusing to come in for supper. He churns over his distress, wishing the clock could be turned back to a time before he'd ever proposed to Mary or even met her. Hear him rehearsing how he is going to tell his family that the wedding is off. Gaze on the fading light as dusk approaches, and feel the first shiver of the night. See him go inside, his shoulders slumped, his head bowed. First he tries to calm his mind, by picking up his chisel and getting on with his jobs by the dim, flickering oil lamp. But that doesn't help and eventually a huge weariness comes over him. He lies on his bed, pulls the blanket over himself, and sighs.

Perhaps it will be clearer in the morning.

*Consider* Joseph's predicament. He certainly deserves our sympathy. He is a righteous Jew, concerned to uphold the laws and customs of his world. And those laws say he should divorce Mary, although he's only betrothed to her, and leave her to carry the shame of an illegitimate child. But God intervenes, and this very ordinary person does an extraordinary thing – he takes Mary to his home, completes the marriage contract and acknowledges the child as his.

Consider the example of forgiveness that Joseph demonstrated to all around; consider the risk he took of being shamed himself.

And if the 'true' story was ever revealed, he would become a laughing stock, as well as a cuckold.

Consider how, here, at the very beginning of Jesus' life, we see two of the principles of Jesus' later teaching – the first, to be slow to judge, and generous in forgiveness. And the second: do not cling to rules for the sake of appearances or through fear of the priestly hierarchy, but practise mercy.

Is it at all possible that Joseph told Jesus this story when he grew up, and that as Jesus pondered it, he drew these lessons from his own remarkable beginning?

*Contemplate* the various ways in which God reveals himself in this short passage – through a dream (might we call this spiritual alertness?), and through an angel (might we see this as the intervention of a trusted messenger?) and through the Old Testament prophets (we might call this the word of God).

Contemplate how God most readily reveals himself to you. Is it through your own innermost dreams and prayers, or through the mediation of others, or through Scripture?

*As you desire to imitate him*

Dear Father, may I imitate the trust Joseph put in you  
And the mercy and love he showed to Mary.  
Enable me to do extraordinary things for you  
So that I may provide a safe place  
For your birth this Christmas.  
Amen.

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