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**AECI Advent 2020 Reflection: ‘The Hidden Strength Of The Hidden Christ’**

***"The holy time of Advent is here; it seems to me that it is very especially the season of interior souls, those who live unceasingly and through everything wholly 'hidden with Christ in God'."*****(Elizabeth of the Trinity)**

**Advent 2020 (WEEK ONE):**

**Week beginning Sunday 29th November 2020 – JOURNEY AND NATURE**

*‘Then Mary said, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.” Then the angel departed from her. In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth’* (Luke 1: 38 – 40)

Embracing real change and adopting new patterns of thinking and behaviour can seem daunting and impossible to accomplish. It can feel like an arduous trek. Mary leaves her home to visit Elizabeth. She travels on a journey perhaps as far as 130 kilometres to dwell in the house of her relative. The Annunciation has changed every element of her life. She needs a familiar face, a family member, a friend. She needs space to rest and to fully process this huge transformation in her life. In 2020 there has been much upheaval and disruption to the pattern of our lives .You might feel the same as you consider the future!

Advent, like the season of Lent, can present an opportunity to explore our most formative experiences and our whole personality before God. As we make time for daily reflection and for prayer we might come to focus exclusively on the root causes of any fear, anger, frustration or restlessness that we hold within.

This can take true courage. It is a step towards deeper self-knowledge. We are there, in some unknown territory, between those emotional and mental responses with which we have become so accustomed on the one hand, and a sense of fresh discovery and new practical insight around the world on the other.

To identify ourselves with the natural landscape can help us keep some tranquillity in the midst of personal change. Think of any journey that you have made – at home or abroad – where the natural world has gripped you, even lifted you to consider what is achievable with patience and with the support of others! Think of this journey of Mary to visit her cousin Elizabeth with remarkable news and feelings of hope so tangible. Think of the journey of Joseph and Mary later in the Nativity Story towards Bethlehem, passing the Judean Mountains and the expansive countryside. They are attuned only to the Spirit of God as they push on.

Mary is strengthened by her encounter with the angel Gabriel, guided from a sense of the sacred 'within'. She knows an 'interior silence' and strides softly towards a kinder place outside of worry and distrust.

**Advent 2020 (WEEK TWO):**

**Week beginning Sunday 6th December 2020) – LIGHT AND MERCY**

*‘For the Mighty One has done great things for me—  
    holy is his name.  
His mercy extends to those who fear him,  
    from generation to generation.  
He has performed mighty deeds with his arm;  
    he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts.’* (Luke 1:49-51)

Mary's Song of Praise (‘The Magnificat’) offers extraordinary insight into how she understands the influence of God. Themes of praise, salvation and compassion are woven together in a way that empowers and focuses this young woman. There is a renewed sense of those ‘divine qualities’, of mercy and of strength, and a deep desire to honour the source of inspiration and transformation.

Our lives can take such dramatic and unforeseen turns. Feelings of stress, isolation and anger can bubble away at the surface as we wonder exactly what direction we are travelling in. There are mountains to scale and rivers to cross. At those moments, it is our 'roots' that count. It is through the unearthing of a quiet faith that we come to gauge the order and the meaning of 'all things', in attending to the near presence of the Spirit on our journey we grow in sincerity.

Along the route of change and transformation, we might come (…perhaps unexpectedly) to a moment of ‘light’ that offers clarity and support. It might be the 'light' of the morning, of prayer, of new perspective or merely of another person's presence. In whatever way, it might be searching us out in the here and the now. This Advent we reflect on our readiness to respond to the mystery of new direction and promise.

Mary's unfailing trust in God as such a young woman compels us to consider how we respond to 'the unknown' ahead of us in life. Another Elizabeth, author Elizabeth Elliot, writes directly about this, urging us to overleap our mental limitations. 'I will find rest nowhere but in His holy will that is unspeakably beyond my largest notions of what He is up to'.

During the Visitation, it is Elizabeth (Mary's cousin) who brings words of comfort to Mary, ‘Blessed are you’, she affirms. She encourage in her a sense of confidence and certainty in the future. She shares deeply in the joy of this news of God working within human space and time. There is something profound happening ‘*within’* and *‘between’* these two women.

Towards the end of ‘the Magnificat’ (Mary's Song of Praise) we read of God's merciful nature, '...he has not forgotten his promise to be merciful'. How are we to understand this in the context of the hostility, chronic anger and hatred within our world today? Perhaps, this 'divine mercy' she identifies lies somewhere alongside our inner willingness to celebrate a transformative power at work, the ‘conversion’ of the soul where we come to place all - even our lowest moments individually and collectively - in the hands of the Eternal One. ‘Create in my soul,’ writes Elizabeth of the Trinity, ‘so that I may become another humanity.’

Amidst uncertainty and amidst societal and political change we can cling to 'God's mercy'. We find again meaningful relationship with that 'quiet compassionate presence' active at the source of our being. It wrestles us away from our worldly worries and places us again in the 'firmament of light', where nothing can trouble us. It is hidden but dynamic. There is ‘movement’ towards mercy, as we accept mercy.

Jewish philosopher Martin Buber wrote that ‘The world is not divine sport, it is divine destiny. There is a divine meaning of the world, of man, of human persons, of you and me.”

**Advent 2020 (WEEK THREE):**

**Week beginning Sunday 13th December 2020 – TRUTH AND CONFLICT**

*‘In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) And everyone went to their own town to register. So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David’* (Luke 2: 1-4)

Mary and Joseph are caught up in turbulent political events. The Gospel of Luke tells us that the Romans were consolidating their presence in the region. Joseph and Mary had strong Jewish connections, yet the Judean province through which they travelled was somewhat in a state of religious and political turmoil. King Herod and his supporters demanded influence under the watch of Roman occupying forces. Ideologies clashed, leaders demanded the obedience of the people, competing 'truths' were voiced.

Yet, in the holy couple we see a most unique element. They journey towards Bethlehem not to promote an opinion or viewpoint - as if they 'own' or 'possess' a particular truth or reality - but more as two believers ready to 'stand openly before' Truth and to enter new relationship with God at the given and appointed time.

To stand before 'Truth' takes great courage. It means not being influenced solely by one’s own thoughts or feelings, by our history or by our identity, nor our own narrow sense of space and time. (Elizabeth of the Trinity frequently uses the word 'abandonment'). It is only once we have arrived here that we are ready to 'unlock' what lies within, what is 'still' as storms rage around us, what is 'hidden' and what is 'strong.'

The book of Isaiah within the Old Testament gives its readers a glimpse into the character of the coming child born to shed 'light' on a 'dark' world. 'He will be clothed with fairness and truth', writes the author. In these passages there is a clear and a continual thread linking 'truth' with the promise of 'peace'. The turbulent and chaotic old order is to be swept away. Again, we can reflect on our own cry for 'peace'. Are we able to see how interlinked these concepts might indeed be?

On reaching Bethlehem so as to register in the census called by Emperor Augustus, Mary and Joseph are aware that the birth of their child is imminent. They now stand courageously before 'Truth' as events rapidly unfold. In a land ravaged by conflict and enmity, they are perhaps very aware that something fundamentally different is close at hand, the promise of a new covenant, of a true harmony, the 'Peace' described by Isaiah where 'leopards will lie down with young goats' (Isaiah 11:6).

Alone before God, the faith of Mary and Joseph continues to shine through. They seek a place of comfort amidst the streets of Bethlehem. The 'waiting' is almost over. Life goes on much the same around them, yet perhaps some townsfolk do detect a 'stirring presence' in the still of the night, in the magical shape of the surrounding hills and plains, in the skies that are bathed in a gentle light.

Today, powerful emotions and feelings like envy, pride, desire and deep rooted fear swirl around our hearts and our heads as much as ever. They suggest that this world is all important and its attractions and attachments are exclusively what matter. Our fragile 'vessel' – our ‘poor souls’ (St. Teresa of Avila) - then soon become full and the presence of 'Truth' is obscured. The 'divine child' so enters our sphere out of a compassion that seeks to transform us from within.

**Advent 2020 (WEEK FOUR):**

**Week beginning Sunday 20th December 2020 – STILLNESS AND STRENGTH**

*‘He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. While they were there the time came for her to deliver her child’ (Luke 2:5)*

Tired from extensive travelling, from anticipation, from seething regional conflict and yet both still following the instructions of the angel, Joseph and Mary are naturally drained from the physical, mental and spiritual challenges they have faced. And they wander through the streets of Bethlehem to secure rest, shelter and some comfort.

No room at the inn.

Where to turn?

Panic.

An 'outbuilding'?

Simplicity, perhaps the 'interior silence' speaking.

Refuge.

For now.

A light like no other burns bright across the evening skies.

Simplicity. In the 'interior silence' speaking.

A promise. And to be fulfilled.

Now.

Observant shepherds become curious as animals bleat and bray. There is an unsettling stillness. Townspeople hurry home. Far away astronomers seek patterns and prophecies. The Star shall rise slowly into the night over the small Palestinian town of Bethlehem.

Mary finds the Strength

Joseph finds the Strength.

The waiting is over.

Then.

Now.

**Christmas Day (Friday 25th December 2020)**

Christ is no longer hidden. His birth in a 'lowly cattle shed' is real.

In the course of his life he will now address that which is 'hidden' and that which is 'precious' in our own nature. He will ask simply: *What dwells within the human person? What avenues of 'Truth' and 'Peace' are open to us? What might we lose so as to gain the 'Kingdom of God'?*

He will face persecution. And punishment.

From a conviction to uncover the 'hidden' Christ close at hand, comes a 'hidden' Strength that carries us onwards in this fragile human realm. We shall overcome. Our hatred and our anger, our fear and our despair. We shall overcome. What is hidden is revealed! And what stirs as human, as loving and good, is aligned to the presence of the ‘Eternal Thou’.