

Giving Up Control: Blessed Are the Poor in Spirit

This Gospel seems to say we should take control of ourselves: “Be on guard! Stay awake!” In reality, it is a summons to abandon control—or to abandon the kind of control we spontaneously want to have over our lives.

What does it mean to be “awake” or “watchful” or “ready” for the Lord when he comes? It means to be ready to surrender to him, to hear his voice, to do his will, to “let it be done unto us according to his word” and to rejoice in that word, whatever it is. It means to be using all that we have and are in his service, and to be waiting in expectation for him as the bride waits for the bridegroom.

In the present moment this means keeping our hearts in union with Jesus: our thoughts in harmony with his thoughts, our desires in harmony with his desires, our wills in harmony with everything he said and taught and did to be for us “the Way, the Truth and the Life.” It means to be constantly attuning ourselves to him the way a musician attunes one instrument to another—that is, to listen to the note we have just played (the thought we have just had, the desire just felt, the words just said, the decision we have just made) and to “bounce it off” the Heart of Jesus, listening for the echo, to see if our hearts are in harmony with his.

The prerequisite for this is true and deep humility which does not mean thinking badly of ourselves, or putting ourselves down. True humility means “being peaceful with the truth,” including both the truth of our goodness and beauty, and the truth of our inadequacy. Where our inadequacy is concerned, it means

NOVEMBER 29, 2026

1ST SUNDAY OF ADVENT

Isaiah 63:16-17, 19; 64:2-7;
I Corinthians 1:3-9; Mark 13:33-37

being peaceful with the fact that we are simply and radically unable to make ourselves happy alone, or even—left to ourselves alone—to become as beautiful, as good, or as beneficial to others in this world as we are called to be, as we desire to be. It means being “poor in spirit,” which is the condition of those who know they haven’t got it made. Those who know this are open to something—to someone—more.

Being poor in spirit is a blessing, our Lord teaches, because it makes us open to receive, to accept, the reign of God. If I know that I myself do not have the answers I need, the light I need, the love I need, the strength I need; if I know

that within myself, I simply do not have the resources I need to be happy, to be loving, to be generous and given to others in this world, then I am open to Jesus who comes as Savior, as Light of the world, as the Way, the Truth and the Life. I am open to his reign over me. I am ready to surrender. I am ready to give up control, and to give it up to him.

Anything that is a “power trip” closes us, for that moment—or to that extent—to the influence of Christ

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in our lives. When we are conscious of our own power or ability, exulting in it, trusting in it, delivering ourselves over to the unrestrained exercise of it—our attitude is not one of openness to the reign of Christ over us, not a listening attitude, eager to hear his voice and follow it. In the middle of a power trip, we do not listen to anything but the surging energy within us. We do not follow anything but the pinging of our own guidance system and the direction of our own desires. We are like a charging bull or a bullet that has left the gun. We are on our own. And we want to be.

Advent is a time to be aware of our inadequacy, of the destructiveness of the directions we take when we are “on our own.” It is a time to renounce all “power trips”—all confidence in economic power, in military power, in the power of our social status and prestige. It is a time to reexamine any power we have over others, and to surrender it to the Lord of our lives, asking and striving to use it only in response, in obedience to his will. It is a time to examine the use we make of our talents, our position, our resources, and to give up control.

REFLECTING ON THIS WEEK'S GOSPELS

First Week of Advent

***Pray daily:** Lord, you came as the teacher of life, the master of the way. Teach me the way of trust and dependence on you. Free me from enslavement to my own power.*

Monday: Matthew 8:5-11. The centurion said in reply, “Lord, I am not worthy to have you come under my roof; but only speak the word, and my servant will be healed.” What power did this pagan Roman officer, a man of the world, recognize in Jesus? Where do you see this power?

Tuesday: “You have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants.” Are you as willing to learn from God or about God as a little child is? Are you as open to changes?

Wednesday: “Great crowds came to him, bringing with them the lame, the maimed, the blind, the mute, and many others.” Which seem to be more attracted to religion: those who feel they have their lives under control, or those who do not? How would you describe yourself?

Thursday: Matthew 7:21, 24-27. “And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not act on them will be like a foolish man who built his house on sand.” How often do you act consciously and explicitly on the words of Jesus? On what do you rely for security?

Friday: Matthew 9:27-31. “Two blind men approached Jesus. He said to them, ‘Do you believe that I am able to do this?’” What do you believe Jesus can do for you? What are you asking him to do?

Saturday: “When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.” Do these words make you think of the rich and powerful, or of the poor and powerless? Why?

LIVING THIS WEEK'S GOSPELS

As Christian: Write down three areas of your life over which you feel you do not have sufficient control. Ask Jesus to act in these areas as your Savior.

As Disciple: Each day in Advent read a few lines of the Gospels, expecting them to cast light on your daily life. Ask how they do.

As Prophet: During Advent, wear or put where you work some visible symbol which proclaims the expectation of your heart.

As Priest: Ask a couple of people you work with or associate with how they observe Advent, or what it means to them.

As King: Work against the custom of getting into the Christmas season during Advent. For example, try to put off Christmas decorations and parties until Christmas.

Openness to Change: Blessed Are Those Who Mourn

Any new beginning means accepting change. Growth presupposes change. And any acceptance of Jesus Christ—or any deeper, more fulfilling acceptance of him—takes place in an act of simultaneously opening and delivering ourselves to change.

When John the Baptizer appeared on the scene “proclaiming a baptism of repentance,” he was preaching change. He was saying that only change can “lead to the forgiveness of sins.” And only change can lead us deeper into relationship with Jesus Christ. Only change can free us from what holds us back from the fullness of life. Only change can open us to the clarity his light gives to our lives, to the joy his love brings to individuals and families, to working days and weekends. Only change can make peace possible in the world. Change is the price we pay for life.

The strange thing is that we fear change more than pain! Psychologists say that animals will change their habits rather than endure pain, but humans won't. I heard this in a class and did not believe it. Years later I asked a practicing psychologist about it, who said, “I see that every day!”

“People will endure the pain of an unsatisfying marriage for years rather than open themselves to changes by seeking counseling.” Many people prefer to endure physical pain as long as they can instead of seeing a doctor and perhaps having to adapt to an unknown diagnosis or treatment. How many times have we all chosen to put up with some pain or dissatisfaction we are used to rather than take the risk of making a major change in our lives?

*Only change can make
peace possible*

DECEMBER 6, 2026

2ND SUNDAY OF ADVENT

Isaiah 40:1-5, 9-11; 2 Peter 3:8-14;
Mark 1:1-8

What is behind this is fear of the unknown; fear of facing something we do not want to face; fear of knowing something we do not want to know; fear of a challenge we may not want to meet. We make a proverb of the ostrich who buries his head in the ground at the approach of danger in order to feel safe, but we do the same thing. We “put our heads under the pillow” by burying ourselves in distractions: in TV or social media, in work, in talking with others, in anything that blocks out the questions we do not want to hear, the options we do not want to think about. We

make sure we do not have time to pray.

That is why the spiritual life is always, in some sense and to some degree, a call to “go out into the desert.” There are voices that cry in the desert—voices like that of John proclaiming the good news of change, the good news of repentance and “life to the full.” Voices that cannot be heard in the “city,” where there are bright lights to blind us and street bustle to deafen us and idols available to take the place of God.

When Jesus says, “Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted,” he is inviting us to go out into

the desert, to listen to the voices we think we do not want to hear, to open ourselves to that wind of change which is the gentle breeze or the roaring tornado of the Holy Spirit. He is saying, "Look at those things you are afraid of, think the thoughts you are suppressing, face the pain, the dissatisfaction in your life: there is a solution!" Blessed are those who face all the things they have to mourn, for they—and they alone—will find peace, will find comfort, will find joy.

This is not just good psychological advice. The promise of Jesus is not based on the good, homey wisdom that it is better to face reality than to bury your head in the sand. The assurance of comfort Jesus gives is a promise he makes only because "the reign of God is at hand." Jesus does not say just because we face our problems everything will be all right.

He says that redemption, deliverance, healing, the fullness of life is at hand; that all this is present in our world now, is offered—he offers it. There is comfort for those who face the truth of this world only if they believe in the truth of Christ.

And even then, only for those of us who are willing to open ourselves to change.

REFLECTING ON THIS WEEK'S GOSPELS

Second Week of Advent

***Pray daily:** Lord, you came that we might have life and have it to the full. Teach me to look clearly at what diminishes my life, believing that through interaction with you all things can be turned into good.*

Monday: Luke 5:17-26. Some men brought on a stretcher a man who was paralyzed. When Jesus saw their faith, he said, "Friend, your sins are forgiven you." Would you have preferred to hear these words or "Stand up and walk!"? Why? What afflicts you more: sickness, failure, or distance from Christ?

Tuesday: Matthew 18:12-14. "If a shepherd has a hundred sheep and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the 99 on the mountains and go in search of

the one that went astray?" What do you feel is most missing in your life? How are you going in search of it?

Wednesday: "Take my yoke upon you and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls." What is the difference between taking Christ's yoke and learning from him? Which are you more conscious of doing?

Thursday: Matthew 11:11-15. "Let anyone with ears listen!" What is the difference between hearing Jesus' words and listening? Which do you do most often during Mass?

Friday: Matthew 11:16-19. "We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; / we wailed, and you did not mourn." When have you reacted with feeling to something Jesus said? What seems to influence your reaction?

Saturday: Matthew 17:10-13. "Elijah has already come, and they did not recognize him, but they did to him whatever they pleased ... Then the disciples understood that he was speaking to them about John the Baptist." Are there things you have come to see in the Gospels that you did not understand before? Is this because you changed?

LIVING THIS WEEK'S GOSPELS

As Christian: At the end of each day this week, look back and pick one thing that Jesus would want you to mourn over and one thing he would want you to rejoice in.

As Disciple: Try to think of some words or examples of Jesus that cast light on what you mourn over and what you rejoice in.

As Prophet: Visibly express in some way your mourning or your rejoicing each day. Try to express the Christian reason for it.

As Priest: Comfort someone who is mourning.

As King: Try to change one source of annoyance, anger, discouragement or sadness in the environment where you live or work.