

Finding Christ in Advent

BY DAVID GIBSON

The problem of Advent is its way of rushing by. In what can seem just the blink of an eye, Advent's weeks are completed; Christmas arrives.

December's days are filled with shopping, festive gatherings, cooking, and the laying of plans for the big day. In his book "Finding Happiness," Abbot Christopher Jamison, a British Benedictine monk, shares his concern about the holiday season:

"The commercial world has taken over the popular imagination at Christmas and tells us that there are only two essential parts of the festival, namely, Christmas gifts and Christmas feasting. Shopping is the key to both."

If that's all there is to Christmas, one might ask how much there possibly could be to Advent!

Advice for a Well-Kept Advent

Writer Lisa Hendey thinks "the busyness of the holiday season leaves us too weary and overwhelmed." In her booklet for Advent titled "O Radiant Dawn" (Ave Maria Press), she asks, "How can you renew your spiritual strength this Advent? What will help your spirit soar?"

Her booklet, subtitled "5-Minute Prayers Around the Advent Wreath," is proposed to families as "a doorway into the profound solace of a well-kept Advent." Hendey will be recognized by many as the author of *A Book of Saints for Catholic Moms* and *the Handbook for Catholic Moms*.

"Put away unhelpful expectations of what you think Advent should be, and allow this to be a time of simplicity, focus and sacred longing," Hendey suggests.

She urges that ways be found in



families—despite all the season's "to-do lists"—for individual reflection or "shared conversation about what matters most." To that end, her prayers and reflections for each Advent day include a question to prompt thought or discussion.

It seems to me that these tend to be questions a wife and husband or parents and children could discuss together. For example, she asks:

- How does "faith in God embolden you" to surmount your life's challenges?
- Are there ways to show "love and support" for friends or family members experiencing sadness this Advent?
- Where are you "being sent" to serve "people in need?"

Watchfulness is a major Advent theme. Those awaiting the coming of Christ, both at Christmas and his Second Coming in glory,

are encouraged to watch for signs of his presence now.

Hendey notes how Advent invites Christians to “make room for Christ” daily. Not surprisingly, some of her points for discussion in families hone in on the signs of Christ here and now.

She asks, “What signs in the world reveal that Christ is present?” And, are there ways “your actions help others” recognize Christ’s presence?

Watching for the Face of Christ

“I know that the Lord waits for me in you,” Pope Benedict XVI said to a prisoner in December

2011 named Omar during an Advent visit to a Rome prison.

Several prisoners asked questions of the pope when he visited them on December 18 last year. Responding to Omar, Pope Benedict recalled Christ’s assurance that

in visiting the sick or imprisoned one also visited the Lord.

When Pope Benedict announced the Year of Faith in an apostolic letter titled *The Door of Faith*, he pointed out that it would be “a good opportunity to intensify the witness of charity.”

I wonder if family members experiencing the stress of real life—perhaps parents, particularly—were heartened by this comment in the apostolic letter about the presence of Christ in those around them: “Through faith, we can recognize the face of the risen Lord in those who ask for our love.”

The pope insisted in his letter that “the reflection of Christ’s own face” can be seen in “lonely, marginalized or excluded” people. Christ’s love “impels us to assist him whenever he becomes our neighbor along the journey of life,” the pope said.

“Watch!” That was Pope Benedict’s word of exhortation the first day of

Advent 2011. Advent is a reminder, he explained, that life needs to “find its proper orientation, turned toward the face of God.”

Again, in remarks in 2011 for the lighting of a Christmas tree in the Italian town of Gubbio, the pope accented the world’s need for kindness. “Every small act of kindness is like a light of this great tree,” he said.

Recalling the “light shone on the shepherds” when Jesus was born, Pope Benedict added that Jesus is “the true light.” The pope wished, he said, “that everyone may know how to bring a little light to the places where they live: in the family, at work, in the neighborhood, in towns, in cities.” He said, “May each of us be a light for those nearby.”

David Gibson served for 37 years on the editorial staff at Catholic News Service, where he was the founding and long-time editor of Origins, CNS Documentary Service.