

First Sunday of Advent – December 3, 2017 – Very Rev. Bryan W. Jerabek, J.C.L.
Cathedral of St. Paul – 2nd Vespers with the Monks of St. Bernard Abbey – 4pm – 600 words

Throughout sacred scripture, we see that the evening is a privileged time of encounter with God: from the first lines of the book of Genesis, where we read that Adam and Eve walked and conversed with God in the “cool of the evening”, to the many times in the gospels that the Lord Jesus prayed at night. The psalms speak of an “evening sacrifice of praise”, which it is good and fitting to offer to God. The sacrifice that is offered is not the Body and Blood of Christ upon the altar, but the praise of God from one’s own lips, offered upon the altar of one’s heart. And the best way to praise God is with his own inspired words – especially those of the psalms, following the ancient tradition that goes back to King David and our Jewish ancestors.

Monks and nuns in monasteries the world over undertake this office of praise day in and day out, praying for the needs not only of themselves and their benefactors, but for all peoples besides. We are so glad to have the Monks of St. Bernard Abbey here once again for what is now an annual tradition on the First Sunday of Advent. As we join in chanting their monastic office of Vespers tonight, we share in a real way in their spiritual work. Abbot Cletus: in the name of Bishop Baker, I welcome you and all the monks here again this evening, and thank you for this and the many other ways that you enrich our lives through your prayers and presence here in the Birmingham Diocese. St. Bernard’s is a real spiritual oasis, and it’s a special treat when that oasis goes “mobile” and comes here to the Cathedral! We thank also our excellent Cathedral Choir for so beautifully enhancing this evening sacrifice of praise.

St. Paul tells us quite simply this evening: “Rejoice in the Lord!... The Lord is near.” We are able to rejoice in him precisely when we live in his presence and are near to him. God became very near to us through his Incarnation: by becoming one of us, offering his life for us, and thus opening up the path to grace for each one of us. This season of Advent is a time of penitential preparation for Christmas, the great feast of the Incarnation. We must ask how it is that we may draw nearer and more surely to the Lord not only now but for each day of our lives going forward. We need to take stock of God’s grace in our lives – that powerful supernatural reality which is able to transform us in a radical way and make us pleasing to God, holy in his sight. I invite all to have the joy of having their sins forgiven during this season of Advent through the Sacrament of Confession; sin is a weight that hinders our ability to be near the Lord and so have real joy. Sin is an obstacle to God’s grace.

May we reflect, then, during this privileged moment of encounter with God – during this evening sacrifice of praise – on how we might more effectively prepare not materially but spiritually for Christmas, putting to good use this joyful season of expectation. The beauty of the Church’s chants helps us to be at ease and enter more fully, with a spirit of contemplation, into prayerful dialogue with our good God. We ask him to inspire and guide us ever nearer to himself, removing any fears or obstacles that hinder our progress, so that we can rejoice in him always. Amen.