

SUNDAY PLUS

The Lord is very near

A beautiful dance

By Fr Peter Morris C.Ss.R.

I'll never forget that long weekend I spent celebrating our friend's Stag Party. Thankfully, it did not entail the kinds of seedy goings-on that we can associate with the phenomenon! Highlights of the event included spending an evening or so gathered around a firepit outside, telling stories and sharing deeply about life. Our time was interspersed with silences as we contentedly gazed into the flames dancing before us. We were allowing ourselves to get lost in its utter beauty. It reflected the beauty of the genuine bonding that was happening between us.

In the Gospel today, St John the Baptist proclaims to the people that the one who

will follow him will baptise with the Holy Spirit and with fire. Immediately he associates this fire with the process of burning up the chaff left behind after separating it from the more useful wheat.

Rather than the fearful prospect of us being picked out as chaff, perhaps a more helpful thought would be to consider how God purifies us. Our Lord can remove from us all that is useless in the Christian life, leaving behind something that will sustain life and bring about greater yields to come. This process is beautiful, like fire can be if we spend time with it. Just like fire, our life can become a beguiling dance with its own rhythm but with some surprising flashes of joyful exuberance in between.

Fr Peter Morris' book, *Christian Playfulness*, is available from Redemptorist Publications, www.rpbooks.co.uk.



Simbang Gabi

Just in case anybody thinks of sleeping beyond the time of Mass, there will be church bells, marching bands and fireworks at 4am, with special celebratory food afterwards. For more than 350 years, from Thursday 16 December, the Philippines and, where possible, Filipino communities throughout the world, meet for a novena of Masses, known as "Simbang Gabi", as their preparation for Christmas.

The early timing is based on the ancient tradition that Jesus was born at midnight and that it fell to roosters to announce his birth. That's why the novena is also known as the "rooster's Masses" (Misas de gallo) – and the churches are filled to overflowing!

Simbang Gabi is a moment when rich and poor, men and women, children and elderly meet as a community to wait for the coming of the Lord on Christmas Day. The early timing of the Mass means that farmers and others can attend and still get to work on time.

Many people will light small star-shaped candles as reminders of the star of Bethlehem.

Loving Lord, as we prepare for your coming at Christmas, teach us to find happiness amid all the busy-ness. Teach us to celebrate the goodness in the hearts of the people around us. ☪ Amen.

Feast of the week
Sunday 12 December

Our Lady of Guadalupe

Our Lady is something of a linguist! When she appeared to St Bernadette, she spoke the same patois, or informal dialect, which was spoken by the people of Lourdes. At Fatima, the three children heard Portuguese.

Similarly, when she appeared to an Aztec peasant, Juan Diego, on 9 December 1531 near the town of Guadalupe, she used Nahuatl, his native language.

In the truly Mexican image subsequently imprinted on Diego's cloak when he appeared before

the bishop, Mary was dark-skinned like him and wore robes which immediately identified her as royalty. Her black sash showed that she was pregnant and the four-petalled floral decoration on her dress, which symbolised, to the Aztecs, the God above their many deities, declared her to be the Mother of God.

Our Lady of Guadalupe became the patroness of the Americas, but especially of the indigenous people of Mexico. Her most famous words spoken during her several appearances were, "Am I not here, I who am your mother?"

A mother speaks the same language as her children, doesn't she? Why should Our Lady be any different?

"Advent is a continuous call to hope: it reminds us that God is present in history to lead it to its ultimate goal, to lead it to its fullness, which is the Lord, the Lord Jesus Christ. God is present in the history of humanity. He is the 'God-with-us'. God is not distant: he is always with us, to the extent that very often he knocks on the door to our heart. God walks beside us to support us."

Pope Francis

Today:
Zephaniah 3:14-18
Philippians 4:4-7
Luke 3:10-18

Monday:
Numbers 24:2-7, 15-17
Matthew 21:23-27

Tuesday:
Zephaniah 3:1-2, 9-13
Matthew 21:28-32

Wednesday:
Isaiah 45:6-8, 18, 21-25
Luke 7:18-23

Thursday:
Isaiah 54:1-10
Luke 7:24-30

Friday:
Genesis 49:2, 8-10
Matthew 1:1-17

Saturday:
Jeremiah 23:5-8
Matthew 1:18-24

Next Sunday:
Micah 5:1-4
Hebrews 10:5-10
Luke 1:39-45