

Advent Thought for the Day: Saints

Advent Days 14-16 by Maria Henriksson-Bell

Advent Day 14

Saturday 11 December

St Anthony of Padua (born 1159, died 1231)



I have told the story before of how, unexpectedly, someone pressed a rosary and a St Anthony novena card in my hands and how moved I was by the gesture. I had nothing to lose so began a daily routine of calling on my new friend from another realm. As I prayed the prescribed words, ending with my particular request, several things sprang to mind:

I was addressing someone in beautiful turns of phrase who, most likely, would not have understood a word of them. My brother of faith in a nearby realm would have, when in this world, spoken Portuguese and understood Latin more than my modern English, and the Saint in question would be unfamiliar with my location and circumstances.

Did this matter? Only in the way poetry relates to prose.

Why didn't I just go straight to Christ? Because what I needed more than a miracle worker was a friend, someone to talk the matter over with, someone I had no history with. They are helpful like that, Saints. We call out for God and Christ comes disguised as a slave girl from North Africa or a kindly man from 13th-Century Portugal.

St Anthony is, famously, the patron saint of lost things, and legend has it that his first experience of praying for a thing to be returned was with a stolen book of Psalms with lecture notes in the margins, the 13th-Century equivalent of a work laptop. He had sworn a vow of poverty, and the book he found so helpful was too valuable to replace. The thief repented and brought the item back.

A common folk prayer to St Anthony:

Tony, Tony, please look round, something's lost and can't be found.

If you enjoyed this Thought for the Day, please consider showing your appreciation with a donation to Action Aid:

<https://www.actionaid.org.uk/>

Advent Day 15

Sunday 12 December

St Rita (born 1381, died 1472)

When going through a difficult situation there are few things more comforting and strengthening than to learn you are not alone.

The #metoo movement empowered countless women, strengthened by solidarity, to speak up against abuse and harassment and a well-timed "Been there, done that, survived" can spark that last bit of hope needed to keep going.

As you will learn when you look her up, St Rita is patron saint of impossible causes, as throughout her life she was faced with impossible situations involving difficult choices. That she is also patron saint of abuse victims, loneliness, marriage difficulties, parenthood and widows tells you what kind of challenges she was up against.

It is easy to view St Rita as pitiful, as a victim, when we should in fact honour her as a survivor who challenged the societal norms of her time. Like many still do, she lived in a society caught in cycles of violence and vendettas but continued her parents' work as peacebrokers between feuding families, painfully including her own.



There are many supernatural legends concerning St Rita, from her forehead stigmata and incorrupted dead body, to being miraculously lifted into the abbey where she lived out her days. Regardless of the veracity of these legends, we can learn perseverance and courage from St Rita.

We are not doomed to repeat the sins of our forbearers but may, like St Rita, need to play an active role resisting inherited patterns of destructive behaviour.

Most of us, but not all, are spared the barrage of difficulties that beset St Rita. As we read her story we can give thanks for our happy marriages and easy parenting or look to her in solidarity when times are hard. As we trust that through the body of Christ, who transcends our understanding, we have friends in other realms who pray with us, may our eyes also be wide open to see those in this realm who need our help.

Freephone 24-Hour National Domestic Abuse Helpline: **0808 2000 247**
or visit www.nationaldahelpline.org.uk (access live chat Mon-Fri 3-10pm)

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Advent Day 16

Monday 13 December

Saints Perpetua and Felicity (martyred 203 AD)

As I was engaging in the ancient womanly act of washing blood out of a garment, a line of liturgy came to mind: "Washed by his most precious blood". Shocking, to our modern sensibilities and even more so in the context of the blood taboos of ancient societies.

St Felicity was a slave maid in the Roman province of Carthage, who chose to follow her mistress Perpetua into captivity despite being heavily pregnant. Their crime? Refusing to denounce their faith in the risen Christ. She chose the messy, bloody danger and indignity of giving birth in prison instead of home as a sign of loyalty to the way of Christ. It is a hard reality that following the way of Christ devotedly often leads to discomfort or death.

We live in an age of global persecution of truth-telling journalists who seek to highlight the oppression of minorities, of environmental activists being mysteriously killed where big business see interests threatened. Regardless of faith, those who seek justice, peace and truth, and do so in ways that follow the teachings of Christ, are doing God's work.



St Perpetua was herself nursing an infant on this ancient equivalent of death row. It is worth noting that every year in the UK around 600 pregnant women are incarcerated and some 100 children are born in prison. The National Information Centre on Children of Offenders (NICCO) states that many of these women do not receive adequate care and several infants born in prison have died in recent years.

A tragic reason why we keep sensing an affinity with the saints of old is that history has a tendency to repeat itself. At these times their stories don't provide a cosy sense of comfort or solidarity but push our complacent selves to face the ugly reality of our own times.

In the words of St Francis: "May God bless you with anger at injustice..."

If you felt moved by this message, please consider donating to Prisoners of Conscience:

<https://www.prisonersofconscience.org/donate/>

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