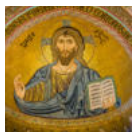




the PROMISE

ADVENT & CHRISTMAS
DAILY REFLECTIONS 2025

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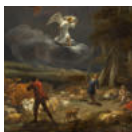
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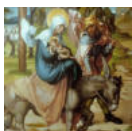
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THE
EPIPHANY



Adoration of the Magi

SANDRO BOTTICELLI (1444–1510)

Adoration of the Magi (c. 1480-1500). Tempera on panel, 108cm x 173 cm.
Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence, Italy. Public Domain.

Many imagine the Magi seeing a bright star in the eastern sky, jumping on their camels and following it unerringly, first to Jerusalem where it momentarily disappeared, and then to Bethlehem where they found the Christ child. Put like that, it sounds very simple and exciting.

But the Gospel does not say that. The Gospel says they saw the star “as it rose”. It says nothing about the star actually guiding the Magi. All that is suggested is that the star was a sign that something very unusual had happened, perhaps even that someone special had been born.

The next time the star is mentioned is when the Magi were approaching Bethlehem—that is, as they reached the end of their journey. The text says: “There in front of them was the star they had seen rising” (Mt 2:9). So, we must conclude that in between, the Wise Men had travelled in darkness. And to keep going they had to seek and enquire. Their journey would have been neither simple nor easy. They must have had doubts since the journey was so long, and they must have faced dangers along the way. But they persevered, and their perseverance won them their reward.

This is why their story has such relevance for us and our faith journey. When we started out in our particular vocation, we were probably attracted by something bright—an ideal or a hope. But this initial “star” does not always remain in our sky. At times it may grow dim or seem to disappear altogether. Clouds get in the way.

We must expect to run into difficulties and doubts. Some people think they are losing their faith when they experience doubt. We should not be surprised when this happens to us. Like the Magi, we must not be too proud to ask for guidance—even professional guidance. No one of us has all the answers. We have to believe that the darkness will pass. Many of the great saints said they experienced a “dark night of the soul”.

St Peter gives us good advice: “For a short time yet you must bear all sorts of trials; so that the worth of your faith, more durable than gold, which is perishable even if it has been tested by fire, may be proved” (1 Pt 1:6–7). He suggests we listen to the words of the prophets “as to a lamp for lighting a way through the dark until the dawn comes and the morning star rises in your minds” (2 Pet 1:19).

When the Wise Men found Christ, they offered him their gold, frankincense, and myrrh. This shows what happens to those who find Christ. When we offer our love to him, he will help us to open up the treasures of goodness that lie buried inside us, so that we can offer them to our brothers and sisters, especially those who are poor as Christ was, and those who may have lost their way.

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The spectacular *Adoration of the Magi*, with more than 80 characters, is one of Botticelli's most successful works. The original was a tempera on monochrome wood of sepia tint. The painting was over-coloured in oil by one or more unknown painters between the 16th and 17th centuries.

The Uffizi Gallery in Florence, where the work is housed, dates the painting between 1480 and 1500. This is important because it highlights the characters present in the composition. On 23 May 1498, the Dominican monk, Savonarola, was executed in Florence's main square, the Piazza della Signoria. He was prior at the Convent of San Marco (where Fra Angelico also lived). Savonarola did not mince his words in his preaching of the Gospel, much of his criticism directed at the current papacy. Botticelli was one of those heavily influenced by the friar's ideas. Savonarola is on the left of the painting pointing out the Christ Child to Lorenzo the Magnificent, head of the Medici dynasty. He seems to be telling Lorenzo that one can only have faith in God who is the true sovereign of us all. The Medicis were Botticelli's protector and sponsor.

Now, turn to the right of the painting. Between the character dressed in blue and the pounding horses is a tall and dignified man dressed in a red cloak—Botticelli's friend, Leonardo da Vinci. And kneeling in front of the Holy Family are not three kings, but eight! Critics believe they represent the eight leaders of the Republic of Florence.

Three roads lead to the crib—the whole world is heading to the scene, which perfectly fulfils the prophecy of Isaiah (Is 60:3–7), read at today's Mass.

MONS GRAHAM SCHMITZER

Just give the word. MT 8:8

The centurion greets us in today's Gospel and invites us into the adventure of Advent. He reminds us that the mystery of Christmas can only be glimpsed by those who set aside their presuppositions of how God acts.

The centurion challenges our habitual assumption that God is either too distant to care about our problems, or too constrained by the limits of time and space to be able to bring about real change. He knows that Jesus is both close enough to care and powerful enough to heal. This mystery of the intimate authority of God will be on full display just 24 days from now when the whole Christian world will pause and marvel at a baby who changed the course of history.

My worries seem too small for God to notice, and too complex for God to heal. Truly, Jesus, "I am not worthy to have you under my roof." But the centurion encourages me to pray on: "Just give the word, and [your] servant will be cured." This prayer of faith and hope invites Jesus into our worries and gives him permission to manifest both his intimacy and his authority. And while he may not answer our prayer in the manner or timing which we expect, he always answers, and more than that, he comes himself and makes his home under our roof.

Jesus, I give you permission today to come into my life and into my worries. Let your face shine on us, and we shall be saved. Amen.

SR SUSANNA EDMUNDS OP

**A greater than John the Baptist
has never been seen.** MT 11:11

From his prison cell, St John the Baptist seeks assurance: “Are you the one who is to come?” (Mt 11:3). Jesus responds, not with abstract concepts, but with concrete signs: the blind see, the lame walk, the deaf hear. We see a parallel in the perennial Christmas classic, the 1946 movie, *It’s a Wonderful Life*. Doubts engulf George Bailey and cause him to despair. God’s answer is concrete: look at the people you’ve served and the lives you’ve changed for the better. This is the fruit that lasts.

You and I are prisoners of our own making. When we fixate on “mine, mine, mine”—*my* health, *my* reputation, *my* career—we create the very prisons that Christ came to liberate. Personal problems dissolve when they cease to be exclusively *mine*. When things go wrong, most of us pray: “Why *me* Lord?” But the saints respond differently: “What will we do now Lord?”

St John may be captive, soon to be murdered, but John is freer than us. He is detached from wealth and comfort, from prestige and reputation. To be happy, we must be detached, too. We give to God our health, our reputation, our career; we keep nothing for ourselves. We can make John’s formula our own: “Christ must increase; I must decrease” (Jn 3:30).

*Lord Jesus, help us forget ourselves by serving others,
and find the peace that surpasses understanding. Amen.*

FR JOHN CORRIGAN

... reached the tomb first. JN 20:4

I always find it a curious detail of this story that John felt the need to share that he ran faster than Peter and got to the tomb first! Did he have a competitive streak? It definitely makes him a relatable figure! But the humanness of these details also lends an air of authenticity to what he's about to tell us, because the point of the story he's telling is not about the race to the tomb at all, but actually what happened after they arrived. What both Peter and John saw led them to believe something so stupendous and amazing that they spent the rest of their lives telling people about it!

Our own faith is based on their testimony. In a sense, John ran ahead of us, too, and through his Gospel, we are able to follow him and Peter into the tomb, see what they saw, and believe what they believed.

What did they see? An empty tomb and some folded linen cloths. What did they believe? That Jesus had risen from the dead! Notice that Peter and John's faith in the resurrection is not initially built on seeing the risen Jesus, but on the evidence of the empty tomb!

So, too, for us! Probably none of us has physically encountered the risen Jesus in his unveiled humanity. But through the account of this first-hand witness, we, too, have been able to see and believe!

Thank you, Lord, for the gift of faith given to us through the witness of those who have gone before us! Amen.

KATHERINE STONE MGL

He loves you. COL 3:12

We say it and hear it often: “God loves you.” But have you truly experienced that love in powerful, transformative ways? I think that if I asked that question to 100 Catholics, many of them would struggle to answer. What would you say to someone if they asked whether you *know* that Jesus loves you? I think if I was asked that question I’d feel a little defensive and answer, “Yes, of course I do!” It’s one thing to believe that Jesus loves me because Scripture says so, it’s quite another to feel that love flooding my heart in moments of stillness, silence and solitude.

The Bible has often been described as God’s love letter to humanity, and this is surely St Paul’s intention in his letter to the Colossians when he says, “You are God’s chosen race, his saints; he loves you.” But this love—God’s love—is not abstract. God’s love isn’t general or vague, it’s personal, specific, and active.

In the Holy Family, we see love lived: Joseph’s trust, Mary’s obedience, Jesus’ presence. Joseph’s trust in the sound of God’s voice rendered him docile to keep the Holy Family safe. We, too, should be confident that Jesus desires to reveal, not just his sacramental Presence, but his personal love for us in the exact way we need.

Lord Jesus, I trust in your love. Open my eyes to see you, my ears to hear you, and my heart to receive the joy of your presence. Amen.

FR JOSHUA WHITEHEAD

Live in Christ, then, my children. 1 JN 2:28

The Office of Readings for today's feast includes a remarkable meditation by St Gregory on his friendship with St Basil. Both born in A.D. 330, these brilliant scholars met at Athens, became desert hermits, but were called back to serve as bishops.

Basil died 10 years before Gregory. In eulogising his dearest friend, Gregory recalled their student years: "Our rivalry consisted, not in seeking the first place for oneself, but in yielding it to the other" (*Oratio 43, in laudem Basilii Magni*, A.D. 381). Their friendship became a school of mutual sanctification, each seeing the other's success as his own. They exemplified St John the Baptist's self-forgetfulness and spirit of service seen in today's Gospel: "I am not the Christ.... I am not fit to undo his sandal-strap" (Jn 1: 20, 27).

In the right environment, young people are earnest and steadfast in changing themselves and changing the world. Gregory and Basil were no exception: "Our great pursuit, the great name we wanted, was to be Christians, to be called Christians" (*ibid*). They embodied St John's exhortation in the first reading: "Live in Christ" (1 Jn 2:28).

The fruits of such a life—a life of charity—is radical communion. "We seemed to be two bodies with a single spirit" (*ibid*), Gregory marvels. Forgetting ourselves creates space for union with others. We are united to Christ, and we are united to our neighbour.

Lord, help us forget ourselves by serving others, and so become one body, one spirit in Christ. Amen.

FR JOHN CORRIGAN

Of course I want to! Be cured! LK 5:13

The great St Francis of Assisi recalls encountering a leper, just as Jesus did in the Gospel today: “When I was in sin, it seemed very bitter to me to see lepers. And the Lord, himself, led me among them, and I showed mercy to them. And when I left them, what had seemed bitter to me was turned into sweetness of soul and body” (Francis, *The Testament*). As the story goes, St Francis gave the man money at first, but then returned to hug and kiss him. With this, St Francis touched the most profound human need: to be known and loved. We sometimes idealise our saints and forget that, while they *became* great examples for us, they did not always start this way.

C.S. Lewis writes: “Do not waste time bothering whether you ‘love’ your neighbour; act as if you did. As soon as we do this, we find one of the great secrets. When you are behaving as if you loved someone, you will presently come to love him” (Lewis, *Mere Christianity*).

It doesn’t matter who we encounter; we are always presented with the option to love. Love may be manifest through food, a listening ear, a hug, money, or even a simple smile. Regardless of how bitter our heart, how offensive the person is to our sensibilities, how scandalous it would be to love in that moment, we can always choose to say, “Of course I want to!”

Lord, help me to love another today. Amen.

PETER GILMORE