

THE EPIPHANY OF THE LORD

&

The First Week in Ordinary Time

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The Second Birth of Christ

A reflection taken from a sermon by Bl. Gueric of Igny

We are celebrating a second birth today. We have already celebrated the earthly birth of the Lord Jesus but what we celebrate today is our own birth. On Christmas Jesus is born but today Christianity is born. There are three things which make a Christian. The first is faith, the second is baptism and the third is sharing in the altar of the body and blood of Christ. Today we celebrate the beginning of our faith, the baptism which consecrated that beginning, and the wonders of the heavenly table which foreshadow the glory of Heaven. Our faith must not degenerate from its beginnings, the grace of baptism mustn't be brought to nothing, and our sharing in the Lord's chalice mustn't lead to judgment rather than glory.

Our faith was delivered to us by those Magi who were the first to receive it. They conveyed this mystery under the form of three gifts. What we must do is possess this mystery of faith with a pure conscience. But doesn't it seem we have the appearance of piety but deny its power? Are we humble in deed and not just in dress? Are we sparing in food but not of doing our own will? Do we display unfeigned charity, patience that is long-suffering, and obedience that is prompt? Set your hearts on these virtues so that both without and within we may be pleasing to God. Baptism cleansed us but Elisha, in his command to Naaman the leper, shows we need to be cleaned further.

Go and wash seven times in the Jordan, Elisha said. Think of the Lord Christ. He was rich and became poor; he humbled himself being laid in a manger; he was subject to his parents; he turned wholly to God by being baptized by a servant, John; he bore with a disciple who was a thief and betrayer; he was meek before and unjust judge; he forgave and prayed for those who crucified him. This is the humility and virtue that opens heaven.

Those, who like Naaman, humble themselves and seek to follow Christ not only recover for their hearts the innocence of Little Ones and become in a measure innocent like children. Behold, if we have lost the grace of our baptism we can humble ourselves and be renewed. All that is required is that we not be reluctant to "go down", day by day more deeply, and be buried, as St. Paul says, with Christ. Let us give thanks to Him because he reserved such a grace for those who believe and turn again to God.

The Life & Love of the Trinity Become Ours

A reflection taken from a commentary by Fr. F. X. Durrwell

The theophany of the Jordan makes the beginning of Christ's public life and ministry. Jesus turns wholly to God in self-gift by his baptism and God witnesses to Divine self-giving by the coming of the Spirit and its resting on Jesus permanently. As the Son gives self wholly to the Heavenly Father so the Heavenly Father gives self totally in the gift that is the Spirit.

The Spirit shows that Jesus is the Messiah, the Anointed of God, and Christ enters upon his work under the impetus of that Spirit. However, the baptism of the Lord has an even larger significance.

John was the herald going ahead to open the road, the friend leading the way. The justice he that "must be fulfilled" is this preparing of the Way. The baptism is the coming of redemption through turning to God. It is a prelude both in symbol and in reality. Our Lord places himself among us sinners and leads us in turning to God, and so away from all that is not of or for God. This points to the other baptism with which he told us he had to be baptized. His immersion in the waters of re-creation anticipates his immersion in the blood and suffering of the Cross but which he shows that nothing at all can separate us from God's saving love.

No wonder that at his first baptism a voice came from heaven: "This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased". Jesus comes from these waters as he was to rise from the dead. He thereby enters into the New Creation which we see foreshadowed in his resurrection. Baptism in ordinary water is, as it were, a kind of preliminary sketch of the entire work of redemption. From then on Jesus is "the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world".

We have been called to a witness like that of John the Baptist in that we are called to point to Jesus as God's answer to whatever practical questions people may alleged as coming between them and God's way to a new freedom and life. We too have received ourselves as gifts of the Heavenly Father and in and through the gift of the Spirit. By the way we live these gifts we become credible, or non-credible, witnesses to God's saving love and ennobling love. We do it more by our deeds than by our words.

Enlightening the Heart by Faith

A reflection taken from a treatise by St. Pope Leo the Great

The day on which Christ first showed himself to the gentiles as the Savior of the World teaches us important lessons. We are invited to experience in our hearts the same joy the three wise men felt when the sign of the “new” star led them into the presence of the King of Heaven and earth. They had placed their hope in his coming but what had led them to do this? It was a revelation brought about by those who had taught them to interpret the stars’ movements and changes. It is a mystery how God works to bring people to faith and the power of that mystery has not changed though the event lies in a distant past. The point is that we, today, experience the grace flowing from that mystery.

Perhaps most people are led to Christ by the teachings of the prophets or instruction in God’s Law. That was not so for the Magi, and I think we see like things happening in our day. Listen to Isaiah: “The Lord has bared his holy arm in the sight of all nations, and the whole world has seen the salvation which comes from the Lord, our God.” Today we see many people being led from error to knowledge of the True Light. These people formerly didn’t devote themselves to faith or to Jesus Christ but now they come to Christ and to faith. They come even though they had given themselves wholly to the study of worldly wisdom and its practice.

What does it mean to say our God bared his holy arm? It means God has sent people like us to show his care and mercy and love to people who have never before experienced them. It means God has used our lives to send a shaft of radiance into their lives and has guided it so that it pierces their hearts. In response they come offering myrrh, incense and gold. It is a three-fold offering made, in fact, by all who come to Christ in faith.

To acknowledge Christ’s universal sovereignty and salvation is to offer gold from the treasury that is an enlightened heart. To believe that God’s only Son has become truly one with human nature is to offer myrrh. To declare that Jesus is in no way inferior to the Heavenly Father in majesty is to worship by offering frankincense. These gifts can’t be offered until they have been received from God. It is our hands—our deeds—that God uses to give them to us, so we can share them with others. Let your hearts overflow in loving deeds, always and everywhere.

The Gifts Our Relationships Cause us to Share

A reflection taken from a text by Fr. Carroll Stuhlmueller

Historically, Epiphany stands at the origin of Christmas gift-giving. This reminds us that gifts bring happy surprises but also raise problems. To receive a gift, for instance, is to feel an obligation to respond with a gift, even if it is only a note of thanks. Sometimes this obligation is very much unwelcome. When Magi showed up in Jerusalem they were demanding to be welcomed into the Jewish community of mutual support based on their call from God to a special relationship. They didn't want to share this relationship, and its benefits. But like it or not, because these foreigners had come to find God's gift of a Savior things would never be the same.

The Magi had come for a strange reason. It is like meeting someone in a public place and finding that one is falling in love and inviting a new kind of person into one's family community. We never know what surprises God intends for us when he brings us together with strangers. Yet hadn't Isaiah prophesied that strangers would come bringing wondrous gifts for the Temple and would share Israel's special relationship with God? Now some of the oddest people turn out to be co-heirs with us of our God's gifts. This causes us to change almost as much as having children changes their parents. Things we never thought existed within us begin to appear. These new relationships reveal hidden resources and talents we had not known existed, or could exist in us!

We need to pay attention to the signals that God gives us when he causes us to have new relationships and so breaks down barriers that formerly existed in us. We find new occasions to forgive and to give, new hopes and desires, new ways of being kind and of caring for one another. These come to us like the "new star" and the Magi come to Israel. These things forced Israel to recall Isaiah's prophecies, and the results are still challenges that can seem unwelcome. They are challenges to us also—to accept Israel in its ways and differences. Does God really want to call all peoples to one huge and complex community? What do you have to do to prepare for the day when it is revealed in all its demands and wonders?

The Lord Jesus wants to lead us to recognize the best about ourselves by enabling us to see the goodness in others and its difference from my own. We need a humble heart to open ourselves to such gifts and receive so many very different people and ways of life into our own life.

God Invites us to the Wedding at Cana

A reflection taken from a text by Rev. James Kirk

Each year, shortly after Christmas, we are reminded of three “signs” that Jesus left for us to help us on our journeys to God. The first is faith itself as solemnized by baptism, the second is the fact that our faith is something to be shared as Jesus shared it with all the world, and the third is the fact that God wills us to depend on one another in a way very like marriage causes. These are called “signs” because they are meant to teach and shape us.

Jesus was invited to a wedding and half way through the celebration the wine runs out. Mary, the mother of Jesus, sees by her faith that Jesus is the one to whom she must turn. She asks him to do something, without any idea what that “something” will be. Since wine was traditionally used to turn an ordinary occasion into a celebration he responds by providing 80 or 100 gallons of wine—making the wedding the greatest celebration any of the participants had ever known. And it was extra special wine too!

We are told this is a showing of Jesus’ “glory”, which seems to mean that relying on Jesus will transform ordinary life into an incredibly wonderful life. A simple request by Mary is enough to set the Spirit working to make the joy of God’s Kingdom incredibly real for us.

Now think of the ways in which your life is surrounded by other members of your family and faith community. Do we use our faith as Mary did to change things for one another, and for the better? Aren’t we all together to learn or teach, to help or be helped? Haven’t we a covenant with one another that binds us together in these ways? It all starts from baptism and begins to flower as we share our faith with others, and bursts into full bloom when that faith leads us to depend on Jesus wholly.

We aren’t asked to wait for anniversaries to remember all this. Can we be “good wine” for someone? Can we enfold another in care & kindness? Have we reflected that our covenant with Christ is also a promise to be more and more faithful in helping others? Isn’t this a time to stretch our commitment to loving service? The three signs are intended to help us keep in touch with our real selves. They remind us not to collapse into mere routine. We have a schedule of prayer intended to keep us awake to all this by making each moment meaningful. We begin by dedicating each day to God’s glory and honor and continues by refusing to let “neighbors” go unnoticed because we are “too busy”. This is how we celebrate.

Walking in Faith and Hope

A reflection taken from a sermon by St. Aelred of Rievaulx

When I contemplate the works of the Lord they delight me and I exclaim “How magnificent are your works, O Lord, you have made all things in wisdom”. But this doesn’t ravish my whole soul because I don’t yet see my Lord. I see only something of God’s power and wisdom and beauty but only a little. When I turn my eyes to the works of his mercy and of God’s grace to the wretched I begin to cry out “What shall I return to the Lord for all his mercies to me”? This is only increased by the appearance of the Savior, which we have been celebrating.

I can distinguish three phases in God’s work with us. The first is that which was created, the second that which was condemned on account of sin, and the third that of glory. The first was found in Paradise and the second will be seen on the day of judgment but the third only in Heaven. Our present condition is signified by the star that appeared to the Magi. A star is seen only in the night and it is now night for us compared to the brightness to come from the Sun of Justice. We often, then, don’t know what we should do, how we should speak or how to pray. So as long as this night lasts we must walk in faith.

In baptism the rule of right faith was shown us and we believed in the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. In the Spirit the Lord is revealed and water is changed into wine. Grace is revealed and fear is transformed into love. We walk in love by our way of life, imitating Christ’s poverty and humility. What many poor people lament we rejoice in because we walk in the way of God’s commandments and mutual support. God has taught us to turn from evil and do good. The foundation of all good is to reject unfaithfulness and sincerely cling to God and Christ. Without this faith it is impossible to please God.

If we have put aside grumbling and become skilled in this way of living we walk in a sure hope. Heaven and earth will pass away but the Word of the Lord remains forever. Already grace has appeared and soon glory will come as well. If we receive God in smallness we shall be given God in all greatness. Let us, then, pray that our fears will continually be changed into the wine of faith and of hope and that we may be confirmed in daily good works until the coming of our Lord and Savior in glory.

Mary Shows Us How to Celebrate

A reflection taken from texts by Carlo Cardinal Martini

“There was a wedding in Cana and the mother of Jesus was there..”. Mary was invited and so Jesus and his disciples were invited too. And at some point, Mary went to Jesus and said “they have no wine”. Was it that the disciples were last minute guests and drunk up what had been provided for a smaller group? If so no wonder she asked Jesus to set things right. But this is not what is important to us.

Everyone helping with the wedding had a task to do. Perhaps Mary’s was overseeing everything. She sees the whole picture and knows what is essential; i.e., she has to make sure the celebrating doesn’t stop half-way. This is characteristic of a contemplative spirit—it sees the whole and how every little thing fits in that whole to make life as wonderful as God intends it to be. But that won’t happen if the wine runs out. If it does then we have to follow Mary’s example and turn to Jesus.

Notice that Mary doesn’t tell Jesus what to do but only calls his attention to the problem: They have no (more) wine! Here is the special gift of one who is a contemplative. It is not a gift of making anything happen but of bring all things to Jesus, and so to the Heavenly Father. Jesus is the one who makes things happen. We learn this from Mary and are saved from trying to make ourselves into experts who make things be as they should.

Contemplatives are enabled to see the whole, and so see what is lacking to make the whole of life good and a celebration of God’s coming. Some may not like it when a contemplative calls attention to what is lacking. Some think we can’t do anything, so there is no point in making matters worse by calling attention to the unwelcome facts. Contemplatives know, however, that we can always turn to Jesus and let Jesus decide what to do.

Actually, those who help us see what is missing do us a great favor. They are the true realists, both about our situation and our impotence to set all right. Indeed, like Mary, contemplatives show that the missing element is Jesus, and he points our attention to God. Somehow this restores to life its character as a celebration. Now we know who and what we celebrate. We don’t try all sorts of experimental solutions but place ourselves, and everyone, into God’s hands. Because we know they are the hands of love!