

THE CELEBRATION OF THE EPIPHANY

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OUR CALLING TO FAITH & SERVICE

A reflection taken from a sermon by St. Leo the Great

God saw that the world was on the way to perdition. God determined to rescue it. He has done it in these “latter days” by his merciful providence because God fore-ordained the salvation of all Peoples in Christ. The Peoples I am speaking of are the numberless offspring promised of old to the blessed patriarch Abraham—an offspring he acquired not according to the laws of nature but according to the fruitfulness of faith.

Told that his descendants would be as countless as the stars, the father of all these Peoples was given the hope of a posterity which wouldn't be of the earth but of heaven. Let the full number of Peoples take their place in the family of the patriarchs. Let the gentiles enter! Let the sons of the promise receive the blessing of Abraham's race according to flesh and blood, even though it rejected its own flesh and blood in the person of Christ.

In the person of the three sages let all Peoples worship the creator of the universe. Let God be known no longer only in Judea but throughout the world. In every place as well as in Israel, let the Name of the Lord be glorified. That is why we have been instructed by the mysteries of divine grace. We are to celebrate the day of our own first fruits, the initial call of the gentiles. We are to do it with spiritual joy and with great gratitude to the God of all mercies. God has qualified us to share in the lot of the saints in light, as St. Paul has testified. God has *“delivered us from the power of darkness, transferring us to the Kingdom of his beloved Son”*. According to the prophecy of Isaiah, *“the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light! Day has dawned on those who lived in the shadow of death!”*

The prophecy was that *“peoples who never knew you will fly to you for refuge”*. Abraham saw this day and rejoiced to know that in his offspring, that is in Christ, the children of his faith were to be blessed. By their belief he was to become the father of all Peoples. *“He gave glory to God in the firm conviction that God was able to fulfill what he had promised.”* This is the day of which David sang in the psalms: *“All the Peoples you have made will come and adore you, Lord; and they will give glory to your name”*. Again he said, *“The Lord has made known his salvation; God has displayed his holiness in the sight of all Peoples”*.

We know that all this has come to pass because the three Sages were called from their own far off land and led by a guiding star to recognize and worship the King of Heaven and Earth. Surely, this star's guidance leads us as well to recognition and worship. We are to imitate the homage of the Sages. We are to respond with all our hearts to the grace that is inviting everyone to follow Christ!

In this effort we must all help one another. Then each and all of us will shine like children of the light in God's Kingdom. We gain admittance to it by sound faith and good works. It happens through our Lord, Jesus Christ. He lives with God the Heavenly Father and with the Holy Spirit for ever and ever. Amen.

WHAT THE SAGES TEACH US ABOUT FAITH

A reflection from In the Likeness of Christ by Fr. Edward Leen

We all know that the call of the Three Magi symbolizes the vocation of all Peoples. But the truth goes deeper than this. God is a hidden God and that must be true for us as humans. God wants us to draw nearer but tempers divine brilliance so as not to hurt us. The incarnation not only conceals God but is God's greatest self-revelation.

That we are dull in perceiving God is not due to God or to the way God reveals himself but to the character of our faith. We clothe God's message, God's Word, with garments that we have woven ourselves using our merely human ideas and imaginings. The challenge is not to reject the ways of revelation that have been selected by God and not by us.

The Three Magi didn't reject anything about God's chosen way of revelation. They took God on God's own terms. They acknowledged God in the lowliness of the guise in which he appeared. They looked on a baby; and they said, "God!" Their faith was wondrous.

Think of it. These three were able to discern the king of kings, the great redeemer of the human race, spoken of in prophecy for centuries, but in the form of a helpless baby, lying in an earthly mother's frail arms, and under a miserable roof. This is a truly marvelous thing.

We think they must have been persons of very pure lives, to a large extent immune from the corruption of the world in which they lived. Didn't they have to be gifted with great scientific knowledge? Mustn't their knowledge have been clear and weren't they docile and yet simple minded, eager to acquire the truth and ready to submit to it? Weren't they ready to do this, no matter how much God's revelation might conflict with their traditions and their prejudices?

It may well not have been so. So for me the wonderful faith of these three passes all belief. Their appearance in the pages of St. Matthew's Gospel is like a sudden burst of glorious sunshine. It breaks in a flood through a sky wrapped in a mantle of somber gray. *"And the star went before them until it came and stood over where the child was, and seeing the star they rejoiced with exceedingly great joy; and entering into the house they found the child with Mary his mother"*.

Their long quest had come to an end. As they saw the humble roof under which the child was, and as they perceived the lowly simple condition of his parents, were they taken aback? Had they any misgivings? Were they troubled by doubts? Were they expected to discern in this humble baby an object of their royal homage? It was perhaps the supreme test to which they were subjected. Their faith magnificently triumphed over all appearances. Their hearts responded with loyal love to the touch of grace. They were actually unprejudiced and ready to concede to God whatever form in which God should choose to manifest himself. We are called to do likewise, in the circumstances that make believing a challenge for each of us. God offers us too the grace.

THE WAYS IN WHICH THIS CHILD IS DISARMING

A reflection by Jurgen Moltmann

The mighty vision of the prophet Isaiah speaks of the liberation of oppressed people through the disarming birth of a divine child. The goal is that we turn from bloody war to that peace which endures and is unbroken. In order to portray this hope for liberation and peace, the prophet falls back on a picture that is positively expressionist in style. The images jostle and tumble over one another, distorted into what is impossible for human being—possible only to God.

Realistically, though the prophet talks about hunger, slavery and occupying troops, he ends messianically. He lets his vision of the birth of the child and the appearance of the peace of God shine like a light into the conflicts and experiences of our real life.

It isn't easy to keep all this together when one is used to splitting up faith and politics, God and experience, and when one is accustomed to celebrate Christmas and the Epiphany only in the heart and in the bosom of one's family. But the message of the prophet is a realistic vision, and what it talks about is a visionary reality. It is a message for the people, a message sent into the camps of the exiled and the slums of the poor. This is a Word against those who control the arms industries and the fanatic seekers of power. If we really understand what this revelation means it will burst the bonds of Sunday worship. If the message really lays hold of us, it leads us to Jesus the liberator, and to the people who live in darkness and who are waiting for him and help.

Anyone who belongs to the people who dwell in the land of darkness, or anyone who has ever belonged to that people, will find this message about the "disarming" birth of the child as alluring as it is unbelievable. Who are these people in deep darkness? In the prophet's time it was that part of Israel under the Assyrian yoke. Every imprisoned Israelite knew the tramp of the invaders boots, the bloody coats and the rods of the slave drivers. We can still see them in ancient frescoes. For the prophet Assyria is the representative of all power that is hostile to God, and that makes her the quintessence of all human oppression. He talks about a misery experienced by people everywhere. That is why prisoners of every age have found his meanings so clear. They see in them their own hopes, and fate. *"They will pass through the land, greatly distressed and hungry—these afflicted people—and will be enraged and curse their king and their God, and they will stare at the sky and look to the earth and will find only distress and darkness!"*

God seems to have hidden his faith from them. They run in every direction, as though to fortune-tellers and mediums and demagogues, and only become more confused. I felt this when in 1945 long columns of us were driven into prisoner of war camps under the sticks of the guards and with hungry stomachs and empty hearts and with curses on our lips. Some of us glimpsed also the radiance that shines from the divine child. This light didn't let me perish. We are all faced with a burning question:

On which side of the barbed wire are we living? Who sees the light? To whom is the child born—for the peace of us all? Will we continue to cling to human made lights? Will we listen to people who tell us what we want to hear? For God's victory doesn't come about through new weapons and more force, or through alliances or solidarity. God has his own divine kind of victory. God victory puts an end to the victories of human beings. Swords are turned into plowshares and peace treaties replace atomic weapons. But how is this supposed to happen? All the images the prophet paints point only to the Divine Child. This is faith. This faith calls us to love. We must begin by answering God's call and keep looking to how God calls us further.

HOW THE SAGES' JOY FINDS A HOME IN OUR HEARTS

A reflection from a homily by St. Basil the Great

The star came to rest over the place where the child lay. When they saw it the sages were filled with great joy. Why don't we too welcome that star and that joy, and let them fill our hearts? This joy is the same as the glad tidings the angels proclaimed to the shepherds. Let's worship the Lord as he has really come and do it with the shepherds and the Sages. Are you ready to sing: *"This day is born to us a Savior who is Christ the Lord! And he is our God and his light has shone upon us."*

Is it for fear of terrifying us that God comes in weakness and as a servant who would set us free? We have been held in bondage, and mostly by fear. The world is so filled with evils and we had been rendered dumb and dull of heart contemplating it all. But how could we be so ungrateful and fail to rejoice when God himself has come to be one of us? We are celebrating a festival for the entire universe. The blessings of heaven are poured out on the earth. *"Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace, good will among all people!"*

The stars traverse the skies. The Sages journey from pagan lands and earth receives a redeemer into a cave. He doesn't come as God but as human and as a human being of a People. Don't be afraid of the task. Rather, let no one be without some gift to offer and let all start with the gift of gratitude. We are celebrating the world's salvation and Christ's coming among us as one of us. What frightens us is that God hasn't done the work for us but has asked us to do it with him. We have to let God's power and grace work within us.

To Adam and Eve it was said: *"You are earth and to earth you shall return"*. But now it is said to us that we are united to heaven, and to heaven we shall be admitted. We don't hear any longer what Eve heard: *"In sorrow you shall bring forth your children"* for happy is the one who has borne Immanuel and happy the breast that nursed him. *"For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and sovereignty shall be upon his shoulders"*. What does our sovereign say to us? *"As I have loved you so you are to love one another."*

Come, now, and join all those who gladly welcome the Lord. Think of the shepherds now clothed with heavenly wisdom. Think of the priests blessed with the gift of prophecy and declaring that we have real hope for the salvation we all long for. Think of Elizabeth filled with happiness and rejoicing in God's message. Think of Anna proclaiming the good news and Simeon rejoicing in the fulfillment of Israel's hope for a redeemer-king. They didn't despise what they saw but praised God's majesty.

Like light shining through clear glass, the power of the Godhead shone in radiance through a human body. All whose inner gaze was pure could see it. May our God count us among those he enables to see it. Behold his splendor with unveiled faces! We will be transformed from glory into glory and from grace into grace and from loving kindness received to loving kindness given to others. This is the gift of revealing Jesus Christ to the world. It is the beginning of the world's transformation.

AN UTTERLY NEW DREAM OF PEACE

A reflection from a text by Jurgen Moltmann

We are celebrating the revelation of our Savior, and we always think of him in connection with Isaiah's words: "*To us a child is born; to us a son is given*". That means our liberator has come but as a pleading child. Such a savior has come into a world that is armed to the teeth. And will this child become the liberator and establisher of a new world order of peace? We answer, "Yes!"

How will we explain that his rule will mean life instead of death, peace instead of war, freedom instead of oppression? The sovereignty over the world falls onto the defenseless, innocent, and hopeful shoulders of this child! This requires making a fresh start if we are to enter into a future meaningful as well as possible. The oppressed are to be free, and be free of dreams of darkness that are visions of revenge. They will stand up and rejoice and their rejoicing will free their erstwhile masters who had relied on brutal armaments. The clubs and the iron shoes and the bloody garments are to be gone as well as the grim machinations that destroy all peace.

What has happened is that a new human being has been born and so a genuinely new humanity is possible. It will be a humanity that no longer knows masters or slaves, oppressed or oppressors. This is God's initiative on behalf of his betrayed and tormented human friends: "*The zeal of the Lord of Hosts will do this*". It is the zeal of ardent love. No other initiative and no other zeal can be used to seize and realize a sure hope.

There are, and have been, many movements and much zeal for liberation. To many Christ's coming sounds like a promise of God's vengeance. That is how many picture the Last Judgment. But what kind of blessedness rejoices in the groans of the damned as a background to joy? God is born a child and not a hangman. On his own cross he prayed: "*Forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing*."

What does the rule of this new king look like? We have to know if we are to begin to live rightly. For one thing, he will uphold peace and establish justice. We are only familiar with peace based on injustice and justice achieved through conflict. Among us the two realities are divided by a struggle for power in which might makes right. Isn't it the weakness of the peacemakers that makes peace fragile? We see why it is only the zeal of love that has a power to put together what was separated. It doesn't ignore breaches of peace, or break others' peace for the sake of one's own. Peace and righteousness will only kiss when there are "new persons".

Is this a real possibility? There isn't anything wrong with good dreams. The Gospels proclaim the first "new person" is Jesus the Christ. So the dream of a liberator and peacemaker isn't just a dream. He is already here and we can follow him, making visible something of his peace that will be complete in the Kingdom. It has become possible for us in fellowship with Jesus, even if we must join him on the Cross. The zeal of the Lord will be with us all!

SHOWING FORTH CHRIST

A reflection by Fr. John Donne

Everyone has heard the words of holy Simeon as he held the Lord Jesus in his arms. *“Lord, now let your servant depart in peace, according to your word, for my eyes have seen your salvation.”* In his example we see, in a way, the entire life of Christ. Some die martyrs but Christ was born a martyr. He found a Golgotha where he could be crucified even in Bethlehem, where he was born. His birth and his death were but one continual act, and his Christmas Day and his Good Friday are but the evening and morning of this one day.

And as even his birth and his death, so every action and passage that manifests Christ to us is his birth and epiphany, for Epiphany is manifestation. Every manifestation of Christ to the world, to the Church, to a particular person is an Epiphany and a Christmas day. There is nowhere a more evident manifestation of this than in the words of Simeon. It had been revealed to Simeon that he should see Christ before he died. He sees him—actually, really, substantially, essentially, bodily, personally. So this is Simeon’s epiphany.

So too, all of us who have this day received the Body and Blood of Christ in his holy and blessed sacrament have had an Epiphany and another Christmas, another manifestation and application of Christ to ourselves. The Church prepares our devotion for this with Advent, and by a closer examination of ourselves, in order that we too may depart in peace. Our eyes have seen God’s salvation.

To be able to conclude that you have had a manifestation of Christ in your soul, you need a whole Good Friday, a crucifying and an *“it is finished”*, a measure of corrections and a joy in them. You shall have temptations and a Resurrection and an Ascension, a beginning and an irremovable possession of heaven itself, in this world. Make good this day so that Christ will be born in you, and he who died for you will live with you all the year and all the years of your life. He will receive from you this blessed acclamation: *“Lord, now let your servant depart in peace”*.

Simeon was so good a servant as to be content to serve in his old place, but saw also what a gainer he might be if he might be made free by death. Who can fear death who has had the Lord of life in his hand today? I would not hasten my death, but if my tent be burnt down by fevers or blown down with gasses would I rather stay here than go home? But you must die. If you did depart from Christ’s table in peace you can depart from this world in peace. If you have come from that Table and are like a ship riding in calm and at anchor, you may depart in peace, according to God’s word. That is the fruit of Christ’s manifestation in you.

WHAT ARE YOU DOING ABOUT CHRIST?

A reflection from a sermon by Soren Kierkegaard

Although the scribes could explain where the Messiah would be born, they remained wholly unperturbed and in Jerusalem. They did not accompany the Sages who were seeking Christ. Similarly we may know the whole of Christianity, yet make no movement. The power that moved heaven and earth leaves us completely unmoved.

What a difference! The three kings had only a rumor to go by. But it moved them to make that long journey. The scribes were much better informed, much better versed, but they sat and studied the Scriptures like so many university professors. It didn't make them move.

Who had the more and the greater truth? The three kings who followed a rumor, or the scribes who remained sitting with or in spite of all their knowledge?

What a vexation it must have been for the kings that the scribes who gave them the news they wanted remained quiet in Jerusalem! We are being mocked, the kings might have thought. For indeed what an atrocious self-contradiction it is that the scribes should have the knowledge and yet remain still.

This is as bad as if a person knew all about Christ and his teachings, and in his own life expressed the opposite. We are tempted to suppose that such a person wishes to fool others, unless we admit that this person is only fooling himself.