

**SOLEMNITY OF THE EPIPHANY  
FEAST OF THE BAPTISM OF JESUS  
THE FIRST WEEK IN ORDINARY TIME**

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Sunday

## LET GOD ASSUME YOUR HUMAN NATURE

A reflection from a sermon by St. Aelred of Rievaulx

Isaiah says, “*Rise up and be enlightened, Jerusalem, for your light has come*”. Why is the Holy Church enlightened, first in the three Magi and later in all the nations? Ask rather, for whom has the light come? Not for the perverse of heart who remain in their darkness, but for the upright of heart who can recognize the light and, even if they don’t know it, long to adore it. The heart that longs, then, because it is empty is told to rise up—i.e., to prepare itself for the things of heaven.

But what about those who reply, “I don’t see these things of heaven; what are the things of the spirit that I ought to long for?” In the Gospel a story is told of how there appeared to the nations a new star in the heavens; it called them to rise up from the things of earth and contemplate the true light and so become new-borns. Isaiah had said, “*The glory of the Lord has arisen for you*”. Then the Gospel added that a star in which the Lord’s glory shone out appeared and indicated to the Magi, to kings as representing the Church which was to come, that they should look for a new guide to a new life.

All earth-bound and transitory things, all riches and worldly honors, are definitely beneath the true dignity of a human person. One shouldn’t seek simply earthly things. The glory of the Lord came to show there is more. As a result, the children of the earth have their hearts drawn to heavenly things and the work of glorifying God above all that is merely of earth.

As kings the Magi came to Jerusalem and asked, “*Where is he who is born King of the Jews?*” Herod heard these words and was afraid. He was of the earth; darkness covered his mind. So he feared losing an earthly kingdom. He thought that the newborn king would only seek such an earthly kingdom, as he did. But the Magi, and the church of the nations, was not made afraid by this. The Holy Church sees the glory of God through Magi who announced God’s birth as a human being.

Wasn’t the great glory of this Church seen when the kindreds of the earth came to adore a little child, poor and the son of poor people? And now in all places people offer adoration to Christ’s divinity-in-humanity and along with it gifts of gold and myrrh. Each and every one of us was in captivity. We had to be told, “*Rise up!*” The star which led us is Sacred Scripture. Jesus Christ thus came to us. We no longer had an excuse for remaining in our sins.

Jesus says, “*Blessed are the poor in spirit*”, showing the way we should walk with Jesus. We are to renounce our own will and imitate Christ. With the Gospel of peace to lead us we can surely come to God by adoring him in Christ. Yet it isn’t right we should come empty handed. Offer incense—pure prayer. Offer myrrh—mortification of your flesh. Offer gold—true charity. Gifts such as these God accepts most graciously. Then God’s star, Jesus Christ, will become incarnate in you and make you his own forever.

Monday

## LET JESUS' OBEDIENCE BE YOURS

A reflection from a sermon by St. Hippolytus

When Jesus came to John and asked to be baptized John hesitated. Wasn't Jesus the One whose sandal strap John was unworthy to untie? Listen to Jesus: This is what God wishes and we must do it. Jesus offers himself as the perfect example of one who always obeys the Heavenly Father's word and will; he shows us that we are to turn away from the destructive example of our First Parents and not to seek to decide for ourselves what is good and bad. Rely on the leadings of your God. John himself was the first to do as the Lord commanded. I hear your command, Lord; in obedience I baptize you who obey love's call from God.

Can you grasp what great blessings, and how many blessings, we would have lost if Jesus had not followed perfectly the Heavenly Father's word? Scripture says: "*When Jesus had come up out of the water after baptism, immediately the heavens were opened and the Spirit of God descended in the form of a dove and rested upon him; a voice from heaven said: This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased*". Having descended into sin by our own will, had we tried to ascend to God we would have been acting on our own will. Only in doing only the will of the Heavenly Father, and leading John and all of us to do the same, could Jesus raise us up to heavenly reality and make us again children of God.

We are no longer slaves to what we think is our own will but are caught up with the Lord into heavenly reality. Now God's will is done on earth as it is in heaven. That is why we say the doors of the heavenly bridal chamber are flung wide open. We become one with God in the unity that is Jesus the Christ. What was it that Jesus did when he descended into the waters that are this world except to give himself wholly into the hands of the Father? This is the work of the Holy Spirit. Thus, when Jesus rose from the waters the Holy Spirit was seen to be upon him and to abide in him. The voice that spoke says words that are intended for us, precisely as one with Christ. In doing the whole will of the Heavenly Father we are each and all God's beloved children.

That is why Noah's ark is a symbol of baptism; it realizes God's will to save all who will obey and so love with all the heart and mind and soul. The Spirit came to Noah to show him what to do and when to leave the ark. Jesus knew hunger though he feeds millions; he had nowhere to lay his head though his hand upholds the universe; he suffered while healing, he received a blow on the cheek while giving freedom to the entire world, and from his pierced side sprang the life-giving water of obedience. All was done in obedient love.

Listen to me carefully. I call you to return to the life-giving fountain. I call you to contemplate its healing waters at their source. The Son has come into the world to baptize us with the water that is the Spirit and so give us a new birth. What does this water show us? It shows us the love with which we are loved and calls us to love others as we ourselves are loved. Did you ever ask, how can we come to all this? Follow Christ in love. Love is the fullest obedience and the fullest obedience is lived love. Come, as we say symbolically, to this water and this Spirit. What God calls us to do, God gives us the Spirit's grace so we can do it. Believe and obey this call.

Tuesday

## **BELIEVING EVERY WORD FROM THE MOUTH OF GOD**

### **A reflection from a sermon by St. Gregory of Antioch**

*“This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased!”* This Son didn’t leave the Father’s side when he came to dwell in Mary’s womb. Becoming human didn’t separate the Son from the Father and dwelling in a womb didn’t limit the Son to that small place. Whole and undivided in Heaven, God suffered no violation in taking a home in the Virgin’s womb. There aren’t two persons—the Son and the son of Mary, one lying in a cave and the other adored by the Magi, one baptized and the other needing no baptism. No, in Jesus, we adore the Only Son and the one who is the object of your adoration is the object also of your bodily sight even while he is the One and Invisible God and eternally one with the Heavenly Father. The Son belongs to eternity and also to time; he is one in the Godhead and one with us humans, in all things but sin alone.

We believe all this. We believe as well that Christ is the mediator between each of us and God and makes us all fellow-servants. In his own person he restores sinners to unity with God and with one another. He is Son of God and Lamb of God, priest and victim, offerer and offering, the sacrifice and the one who receives the sacrifice. All of this belongs to the Heavenly Father’s testimony to his only begotten Son at the time of his baptism in the Jordan. When he was transfigured on the mountain in the presence of chosen disciples the Voice of God testified to his being God’s beloved son and added, *“Listen to him!”*

When the Son says, *“I am in the Father and the Father is in me”* we listen and believe. When he says, *“He who has seen me has seen the Father”* we also believe. When he says, *“The Father who sent me is greater than I”* we believe. When he says, *“This is my Body which is broken for you for the remission of sin”*, we believe and see that what he took from us is his own. When he says, *“This is my Blood”* we realize that it is truly the very blood of the Son, the one who is seeking to save us.

Now we have been called by God to peace and not conflict. We must be steadfast in our response to our calling. When he says, *“As the Father had sent me so I send you”*, we need to believe and trust. We have the greatest reverence for the holy altar where we share in the sacred mysteries. We don’t want to be guests at this table and at the same time stumbling-blocks to one another. We need to believe that we are called as Jesus was called. We don’t want the Heavenly Father to say of us, *“I have begotten children and reared them; I have fed my own but they have rejected me.”* We must do as God commands us.

May God who is savior of all and author of peace, grant tranquility to the Church, and to all of us. May God watch over his holy flock and protect all those who speak of him to others and who seek to lead them to follow him in baptism and then in ministry to their brothers and sisters. May God join us together into one flock belonging to one sheepfold. Let us believe every word that comes from the mouth of God!

Wednesday

## **THE GOAL OF DYING IN CHRIST**

**A reflection developed from a sermon by St. Bernard**

“Here we have no abiding city, but we seek one which is to come.” (*Heb.13:14*) Once a pilgrim sets out it is necessary to turn neither to one side or the other but to go straight ahead. Happy the one who knows the way to the Heavenly Home and never turns aside from the path that leads to it. One must not engage in activities that have a merely worldly goal and nothing beyond that. But what does this mean in practice?

St. Paul says, “You have died and your life is hidden with Christ in God”. (*Col.3:3*) A pilgrim can easily be held back, oppressed by the burdens that are at times inseparable from a journey. By contrast, a dead person won’t even feel the lack of a tomb! If the dead heard others blaming them for this or that, or who were praising them instead, such a person wouldn’t pay any attention. The dead pay no attention to such things, as pilgrims may. Does death, then, keep one unstained by wholly separating one from what is only worldly? If so, it is an altogether happy thing to be dead.

Christ must live in one who no longer lives in self, if such a person is to have life at all. St. Paul says, “I live, yet I don’t live, for Christ lives in me”. It is as if he were saying that he had died to everything but Christ. I don’t feel or notice or get concerned with anything but Christ, he is saying. If anything is truly of Christ then I am alive and ready for action in its regard. This is a great step along the pilgrim way to God’s Kingdom. Yet perhaps there is a greater step.

St. Paul says, “Let me not glory except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom the world has been crucified to me and I to the world”. (*Gal. 6:14*) Paul is not only dead to the world but crucified to the world. Everything the world loves, if it is not Christ’s, is a cross to him. I, on the other hand, pass by all such things as a pilgrim, and at times with suffering or hardship. I long for something better. We have many brethren who have completed their pilgrimage and their dying with Christ, and their being crucified with him. We must listen to the teaching given us in their now ended lives among us in this world. We must make our pilgrimage through it as we seek to let Christ alone live in us. They bid us seek ever to live in purity. Be careful at all times to maintain this purity, they say. You must not lose hope because at times you are negligent or even wander from the straight path which is our Christian life.

Remember, says St. Paul, that you are no longer only strangers and aliens but are citizens of the Kingdom of God with all the saints. Do you want to be joined with those you remember, who have gone from this world and into God’s Kingdom? They show us the way, the many ways, of following the Lord and letting God’s life bear fruit within us. Surely, we must press onward in the spiritual battle that is our pilgrimage. They reach out loving hands in prayer to help us over the rough places on our road. That is God’s gift. Do not refuse it but walk bravely forward for the sake of the glory of our King and salvation.

*Thursday*

## **THE NATURE & PRACTICE OF SPIRITUAL FRIENDSHIP**

### **From a Treatise by St. Aelred of Rievaulx**

Genuine and spiritual friendship is sought on account of God and for its own sake. Our Lord and Savior has given us the formula of true friendship when he said: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. Behold the mirror. Do you love yourself? Yes, and especially if you love God and so are a person worthy of being chosen as a friend. But do you think you should expect any reward from yourself for loving yourself? No, indeed not. By the very nature of the matter everyone is dear to oneself but what if you transfer that affection to another, loving that person gratuitously simply because your friend seems dear?

Unless you do this, you cannot savor true friendship as it is. The one whom you love has become another self. You have transformed your love of self into love of your friend. Friendship is not a form of tribute, as St. Ambrose says. It is a thing full of beauty and grace and a virtue, not a thing to be used as an article in buying and selling. It is “bought”, so to speak, with love and not money. It is acquired by a kind of competition in generosity rather than a haggling over prices. So, the intention of the one you have chosen as a friend must be subtly tested because that person may not wish to be joined to you in friendship or may think of friendship in a mercenary way and not as gratuitous.

The extraordinary and great happiness we await with God is a matter of God’s spreading and sharing self with creatures. He uplifts them while respecting the degrees and orders according to which he has distinguished each from the others. God does this among chosen, individual souls giving to each so much friendship and charity that each is able to love another as another self. God makes it so that each rejoices in the good fortune of the other, and so in the happiness of the other, that the happiness of one is that of all and a kind of universal happiness is the possession of each. In this friendship there is no hiding of thoughts, no dissembling of affection.

A true and eternal friendship begins in this life and is perfected in the next. What here belongs only to a few good people there belongs to all because all are good. Here testing is necessary since the wise and unwise are mixed together. There none is needed since an angelic and, in a sense, divine perfection makes all blessed. It is to this model that we compare friends now. We love them as we love ourselves. Our confidences are laid bare to one another. We strive to be firm and stable and constant in all respects. Do you think there is any human being who does not wish to be loved in this way? And loving, thus, leads us to God for it is in loving God that we become capable of a spiritual friendship.

*Friday*

## **THE SEARCH FOR HAPPINESS**

from Happiness by Sr Joan Chittister OSB

In folktales of the East written thousands of years ago, there is a story which, in the annals of contemporary happiness research, is still as fresh as yesterday. Once upon a time, an angel appeared to a seeker hard at work in the field of life and said, "I have been instructed by the gods to inform you that you will have ten thousand more lives". The wanderer, who had been pursuing the dream of eternal life for years, slumped to the ground in despair. "Oh, no" the seeker cried. "Ten thousand more lives!" He wailed and rolled in the dust.

Then the angel moved to another seeker and repeated the same message. This seeker straightened up, arms flung towards the heavens, and began to dance and prance and shout with joy.

As I get older, I have come to realize that there is a bit of both seekers in each of us. I have loved life. Like the second seeker I have loved every moment of it, however deep the difficulty of a current crisis. I lusted after every breath of it. I always thought of it as getting better, getting fuller. I got older and loved it even more. What matters are not memorabilia in my drawers and cupboards, but rather what is happening on the inside. Whatever the struggles of it- the deaths, the life changes, the polio- I would take more of it if I could.

I have had what could be called a fair share of what the world would call unhappiness. I have faced the challenge, the struggle to be fully human in a man's world and fully adult in a religious culture whose history has belied its theology, whose practice has been to be more comfortable with male overlords than with thinking women.

I am convinced that we become happy by concentrating on the gifts of life rather than obsessing over its possible pitfalls. The more we express our gratitude to God for our blessings, the more God will bring to our mind other blessings. The more we are aware of what we have to be grateful for, the happier we will become.

Above all, refuse to allow externals to be the measure of the acme of our souls. The Kenyans teach "Those who have cattle, have care."

We become happy by refusing to be beguiled by accumulation or power or pure utilitarianism. For a happy life is a grateful, surprised life. We need to have a purpose in life and then pursue it with all the heart that is within us, and all the energy we have. We must keep our eye on the real thing. Once you know what that really is or who that really is, you will never stop pursuing it. Be grateful. Be happy.

*Saturday*

## **GOD'S FIRST LANGUAGE IS SILENCE**

from Open Mind, Open Heart by Fr Thomas Keating OCSO

There are all kinds of ways in which God speaks to us- through our thoughts or any one of our faculties. But always keep in mind that God's first language is silence. Prepare yourself for silence in your prayer, and if other things happen, then it is His problem, not yours. As soon as you begin to make it your problem, you tend to desire something that is other than God.

Pure faith will bring you closer to God than anything else. To be attached to an experience of God is not God; it is a thought. The time of centering prayer is the time to let go of all thoughts, even the very best of thoughts. If they are really good, they will come back later.

What is the great thing that Our Lady has done for us? At Christmas she brought the Word of God into the world, or rather let Him come into the world through her. It is not so much what we do, but what we are that allows Christ to live in the world. When the presence of God emerges from our inmost being into our faculties, whether we walk down the street or drink a cappuccino, divine life is pouring into the world. The effectiveness of every action depends on the source from which it springs. If it is coming out of the false self, it is severely limited. If it is coming out of a person who is immersed in God, it is extremely effective. The contemplative state, like the vocation of Our Lady, brings Christ into the world.

Interior silence is one of the most strengthening and affirming of human experiences. There is nothing more affirming, in fact, than the experience of God's presence. That revelation says as nothing else can, "You are a good person. I created you and I love you." Divine love brings us into the fullest sense of the world. It heals the negative feelings that we have about ourselves.

The more confidence we have in God, the more we can face the truth about ourselves. We have to face up to who we really are in the presence of someone we can trust. If you trust in God, you know that no matter what you have done or not done He is going on loving you. As a matter of fact, He always knew the darkside of your character and He is now letting you in on the secret like a friend confiding to a friend. Thus, insights of self-knowledge, instead of upsetting you, bring a sense of freedom. They lead you to the point where you can ask yourself, "Why think of myself at all? "Then, you have the freedom to think how wonderful God is and you care little what happens to you.