



# *Blessed*

ADVENT & CHRISTMAS  
DAILY REFLECTIONS 2021

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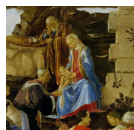
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*first*  
WEEK OF ADVENT





## *The Martyrdom of Saint Andrew*

**BARTOLOME ESTEBAN MURILLO (1617–1682)**

*"The Martyrdom of Saint Andrew"* (1675–1682). Oil on canvas, 123 × 162 cm.  
Museo del Prado, Madrid, Spain. Public Domain.

St. Andrew, whose feast we celebrate on November the 30<sup>th</sup>, is virtually the first person we meet in Advent. His feast seems to be out of harmony with the season, and yet, when we think about it, his feast (like those of St. Stephen, St. John, and the Holy Innocents after Christmas), helps to put the Christmas mystery into perspective. When God the Son became flesh, he made himself vulnerable to physical, mental and emotional suffering. When Andrew accepted, without any conditions, Jesus' invitation, "Follow me," he, too, made himself vulnerable. In fact, like his Master, Andrew was headed for the cross.

Tradition tells us that Andrew suffered crucifixion during the reign of the Emperor Nero at Patras in Greece in A.D. 60. He was tied, instead of nailed, to a cross made like the letter X—since known as St. Andrew's Cross (it adorns the Union Jack). In this way, it was hoped to

prolong his suffering. For two days he preached to the people from the cross before he died. His body was buried in Constantinople, but when the city fell in 1204, the Crusaders took his body to the famous fishing village of Amalfi in Southern Italy, and his head to Rome. It was one of the most treasured possessions of St. Peter's Basilica. Following the Second Vatican Council, Pope Paul VI returned the relic to Constantinople as a gesture towards unity with the Eastern Church.

*The Martyrdom of Saint Andrew* was painted by Bartolome Esteban Murillo (we will meet him again on Christmas Day) between the years 1675–1682, and hangs now in the Museo del Prado in Madrid. At one stage, it was acquired by Charles IV of Spain and displayed in the royal palace. It is a large canvas (50 x 66 inches), and seems to have been inspired by a painting of the same scene by Peter Paul Rubens.

The cross is surrounded by a great variety of figures who play different roles and express a range of emotions. Two men are attending to the fastening of St. Andrew's feet, while a third, crouching, looks over his shoulder at his companion—a black man. At their feet lie a ladder, an axe and a shovel. In the far distance, the populace mills about the nearby hill to witness the execution.

Murillo has balanced the foreground with two groups of figures. On the right are Roman soldiers—the commander and the standard bearer on horseback. On the left, two men converse—one pointing to the saint, and the other expressing anguish. Beside them are two women—one holding a small child and the other drying her tears with a cloth. The artist relieves the grimness of the tragedy with a touch of idealism, for over the martyr the heavens open, cherubs holding a crown and the palm of victory.

Today's Mass gives one version of St. Andrew's call, but St. John presents a much more revealing picture. Andrew and another disciple hear John the Baptist refer to Jesus passing by as the "Lamb of God". Interested,

they follow Jesus some distance behind, perhaps too shy to approach him directly. Then Jesus did something entirely characteristic. He turned and spoke to them, that is, he met them halfway. It was an example of the divine initiative. It is always God who takes the first step. St. Augustine said that we could not even have begun to seek for God unless he had already found us. Jesus asked the two disciples: "What are you looking for?" A good question for us to face as we enter this season.

Before the multiplication of the loaves and fishes, it was Andrew who introduced the little boy with the five barley loaves and two fish to our Lord. And when some Greeks asked St. Phillip for permission to speak with Jesus, Phillip referred them to Andrew. These events are alluded to in the Collect of today's Mass: "May St. Andrew be for us a constant intercessor before you." Andrew, we ask you to introduce us to Jesus.

**MGR GRAHAM SCHMITZER**

**“Your faith deserves it,  
so let this be done for you.”** MT 9:29

In the Gospel today, we hear that these two men followed Jesus and shouted out until they caught his attention, desperate to receive healing. They knew that he alone could heal them. Without seeing Jesus, they understood fully who he was. These men had extraordinary faith! The voice of the Lord had made a home in their heart, giving them the faith to believe in God’s promises. Faith lights the way for us to see the power of God in our life and to experience his healing love.

We may not be physically blind, but do we experience spiritual blindness? Are there any blind spots that hold me back from recognising God’s action in my life?

These blind spots might disguise themselves as doubt, lack of trust, inadequacy, negative self-esteem or doubt in God’s goodness.

The biggest blind spot in my life was that I thought God was far more interested in others than me. I thought that I had to be super holy or pray harder for God to recognise me. God revealed to me that being myself was enough, and that he always loves me for who I am and not for who I think I should be. When we accept Jesus’ merciful love, we too will be free to share God’s healing power with the world.

*Lord Jesus, I believe in you. At times my faith might be blinded by doubt, confusion, inadequacy, distortions of your truth or a lack of trust in you. Lord heal my spiritual blindness. Speak your truth into my heart and nurture within me, the faith of the blind men to see you clearly. Amen.*

St Francis Xavier, formator of the faithful, *pray for us.*

**THERESE MILLS MGL**

**“What must we do?”** LK 3:10

We all know what it is to be ashamed of ourselves. We don't have to live long before we step on someone's heart. Whether it's deliberate or accidental, we hurt other people. If we are sensitive, we will feel shame and regret.

The people listening to John the Baptist felt their own regret. As they listened to John, they started to take a look inside themselves and they were ashamed of what they saw. But all was not lost. They ask John how they should handle this shame? Notice, that John didn't leave them to wallow in their regret. He gave them some very practical instructions. If they were really ashamed of their selfishness and indifference to the needs of others, they were to do something about it—give away that spare tunic.

Now the picture becomes clear. We cannot get things straightened out between ourselves and God and at the same time go on using and abusing and ignoring other people. Real repentance always carries with it a social dimension. The good news of the Gospel is to make us right with God and with others, and with ourselves. For some, the last part is the hardest. Today, too many people lead defeated lives. They live under a shadow of self-recrimination. They have very little respect for themselves. On the street, heads are down and eyes averted. Laughter is absent. Anger fills the air. Most of that comes, not from an attitude of selfishness, but of frustration and a dislike of self.

God is in the business of forgiveness. We have all failed. We all need to repent. This is the time to confess to God and make whatever restitution we can. Then accept God's forgiveness, forgive ourselves, and go out and live as God intended.

*Lord, lead us to seek your forgiveness, accept it, and begin a process of correction. Amen.*



**God, here I am!**

**I am coming to obey your will.** HEB 10:7

If Advent is about God sending his Son to save us, then the converse side of this is our response: we are called into closer union with and discipleship of Jesus—the Messiah who forgives our sins and gives us eternal life. This means that we are called to faith in Jesus and obedience to God’s will—two things which, perhaps more than anything else, are sorely lacking today (the opposite is so often the case: faith in our human selves only, and the supremacy of my will to which all else must conform, including God!)

How this contrasts with today’s second reading where the sacred writer reminds us that what is truly acceptable to God is not our sacrifices and holocausts, but a truly humble and contrite heart that obeys God’s will! Hence, Elizabeth cries out to Mary in today’s Gospel: “Blessed is she who believed that the promise made her by the Lord would be fulfilled” (Lk 1:45). Mary was chosen precisely for this reason: she had faith in God and obeyed his will for her life rather than her own.

This is also something that can be observed in the lives of all holy people: they submit their will to God’s will. In so doing, they become conformed to him rather than the world, and become true signs through whom others are led, not to them, but to God. Sadly today, we have too many worldly people, and not enough holy people—even in the Church.

Advent calls us to be holy people, true disciples of the Lord, who have faith in Jesus and are obedient to God’s will for our lives. May Christ be born in us this Christmas, and may we be born in Christ.

*Blessed Mary, who believed that the promise made [to you] by the Lord would be fulfilled, pray for us who seek to be faithful and obedient to God’s will for our lives too. Amen.*

**He went in and said to her ... LK 1:28**

I wonder how long the angel was with Mary. Was it the time it takes for us to read the passage? Was it a day? A week? It is not clear immediately. Though what is clear is the movement that takes place in Mary's heart.

The angel spoke three times with Mary.

At first, the angel spoke a greeting that appears, by Mary's initial response, to be broad and obscure. Mary was disturbed—awakened perhaps? God's message had entered the realm of her humanity—body and soul.

Next, the angel reveals *what* will happen. Mary's heart adjusts and we perceive its orientation.

Finally, the angel reveals *how* it will happen. The angel prepares Mary for how she will know it is the work of God. Through her dialogue with the angel, Mary's heart moulded to receive the message. We find no resistance in her.

And doesn't this reflect something of our own experience? God's creative word breaking into our life; our hearts adjust to the message spoken to us. This moulding to God's invitation may take time and perhaps many dialogical encounters with God and others as the deep deposit of truth slowly reveals itself. If we believe in the profound mystery of the Incarnation, we can trust that God's word and truth spoken to us will be revealed to us fully through the light and life of Christ Jesus.

*Father, speak your Word into my heart in this moment. May you find no resistance in me as I seek to bring your word to life. Amen.*

**TRISH MCCARTHY**

**“This is the child I prayed for.... Now I make him over to the Lord for the whole of his life.”** 1 SAM

1:27–28

The greater our love for someone, the more precious are the things we are willing to give up for them; the more precious are the things we are willing to share with them.

Hannah longed to have a child; it was what she desired more than anything else. And yet, when God blessed her with a son, after she had weaned him, Hannah gave the child back to God. She was so full of gratitude and love towards God, that she gave to God the most precious thing she had. She expressed her love for God by giving her only son.

This immense gesture, this great expression of love, anticipates and prefigures the great expression of God's love for the whole world: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only-begotten Son” (Jn 3:16). This is what we celebrate at Christmas: God giving to us that which is most precious to him, God giving his Son to the whole world.

But now, it is my turn. What am I willing to give back to God this Christmas? Am I willing to give some extra time to God each day? Am I willing to love and serve God through loving and serving others, especially those in need? I have received so much from God. Am I possessive of all I have received—am I possessive of my gifts and talents, using them for my benefit alone, or am I willing to use what I have received for the glory of God and the good of others?

*Lord, help me to recognise all you have given me in my life, and pray that I am generous in what I give back to you.*

*Amen*

**FR ANTONY JUKES OFM**

**We have seen with our own eyes.** 1 JN 1:2

When I was a young teacher, there was an afternoon poem that the children always asked for. It was *The Wind* by Robert Louis Stevenson:

I saw you toss the kites on high  
and blow the birds about the sky;  
and all around I heard you pass,  
like ladies' skirts across the grass—

I saw the different things you did,  
but always you yourself you hid.  
I felt you push, I heard you call,  
I could not see yourself at all—

How true it is, we see what the wind does but we never see the wind itself. That is how it is with God—though so often we do not even see what he does. We are so busy working out what God should be doing, we miss what he actually *is* doing, and hence we miss seeing him.

We think, perhaps, that in what life gives us, God is punishing us, entirely missing the truth that he is crying with us and supporting us—wanting to work with us to find a way through whatever it is. The question is: “Do you want to see God?” It really is very simple. Look at your life; look at the ways in which compassion, kindness and goodness touch your life. Then ask for the grace to see him. A little caution: although your eyes will tell you what he does, it is your heart that will show you who he is and reveal his face to you. And then life will never be the same again.

A little prayer to say often:

*It is your face, O Lord, that I seek. Amen. (Ps 27:8)*

**MOTHER HILDA SCOTT OSB**



**On those who dwell in the land and shadow of death a light has dawned.** MT 4:16

Walk into any Catholic church and you will see it: the small flickering flame of a candle encased in red glass. Even if every other artificial light in the parish laid unilluminated, you could stand in the far reaches of the narthex or choir loft and enjoy the candle's far-off glow. The sanctuary lamp shines as a powerful symbol that Christ is truly present in the Blessed Sacrament—resting in the tabernacle. Despite the darkness, there is light.

In today's Gospel, we find Jesus traveling to Capernaum having completed his 40-day fast and resistance of Satan. He is starting his Galilean ministry. St. Matthew writes that this is so that Isaiah's prophecy may be fulfilled: "The people that lived in darkness has seen a great light" (Mt 4:16). Jesus then cures the possessed; the epileptics; the paralysed—those struggling with the darkness of sin and physical affliction receive the glorious rays of Christ's healing light.

Our world has seemed quite dark lately. People are possessed by political angst. They suffer epilepsy from an overstimulation. They remain paralysed by fear. But this side of the Epiphany, rather than dwell on darkness, let us focus on light. Far above the grimness churned out by the news cycle or our own inner turmoil, shines the Son—even if his light, like the sanctuary lamp, seems small and distant. Whatever comes our way this new year, individually or as a world, we are not walking blindly. Despite the darkness, there is light—the light of the world.

Lord, you are the light of life. Amen.

**MATTHEW OCKINGA**

**You are my Son, the Beloved.** LK 3:22

Today we find ourselves silently witnessing a dramatic moment in Jesus' life. The Holy Spirit descends from above and the Father speaks words of tenderness: "You are my Son, the Beloved." We are invited into an intimate moment within the divine family—the Holy Trinity. The love of the Father and Son is so real that it is a third person, The Holy Spirit, here represented by a dove.

But that isn't the end of the story. We are not merely spectators; we have been invited to enter into the very life of the Trinity, beginning with day of our Baptism in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. The dynamic of love that it is the Trinity is bestowed upon us—a love that is beyond words. St. John says, "Think of the love that the Father has lavished on us by letting us be called God's children; and that is what we are" (1 Jn 3:1).

Notice that the Father doesn't go on to say, "And now you have work to do." Rather, the priority is the relationship. As St. Thomas Aquinas would say: *being comes before doing*. That is not to say that there isn't work to do. Jesus certainly had a mission—a very important mission—but it's not first.

It is the same for us. First we are called to be sons and daughters of our loving Father, to receive his great love and to base our lives on that. Then we respond to the call of Love by loving God and his other children in return, but that love is not of our own doing. We can only love with Love, that love with which he has first loved us.

*Thank you Lord for the love you lavish upon me. Help me to remain in your love in every moment. Amen.*

**SR. ANASTACIA REEVES OP**