

# The Sign



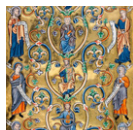
ADVENT & CHRISTMAS  
DAILY REFLECTIONS 2023

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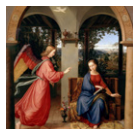
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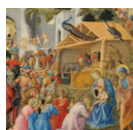
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## The Epiphany

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**Shoulder my yoke and learn from me.** MT 11:29

Jesus calls those who are overburdened to come to him. Given the busy pace of this time of year, I think that means all of us! Yet usually, our experience of being overburdened is not due to an especially heavy burden, but rather due to the many little burdens that we are expected to carry. And often these burdens only start to feel heavy when we are exhausted from all the juggling.

The solution proposed by Jesus is to learn from him by sharing his yoke. The symbol of the yoke—a wooden beam used to unite two oxen while ploughing a field—immediately calls to mind the wooden cross carried by Jesus, by which he reunited humanity to God. But not only has Jesus carried this ultimate heavy burden for us, he also carries our many little burdens with us when we unite them to his cross.

What is the lesson we learn when we are yoked with Jesus and his cross? We learn to look where he is looking, to seek what he is seeking, and to expect what he is expecting. Like a newly married couple, we grow in a union of hearts and of desire. We learn what burdens are important to him, and what he wants us to let go of. After all, one of the adjectives describing marriage is “conjugal”—literally: “Together yoked.”

Today is the feast of St Lucy, patron saint of sight. Through her intercession, may our vision be refocused on Christ—who ploughs alongside us, and who is waiting for us today in every little moment.

*Jesus, I surrender to you my expectations of myself and others. Fix my eyes on your coming. Amen.*

**SR SUSANNA EDMUNDS OP**

**The Lord is kind and merciful;  
slow to anger.** PS 144(145):8

And yet, in the Old Testament, God is often presented as an angry God. When the people of Israel made the golden calf and bowed down and worshipped it, the anger of the Lord blazed up (Ex 32:10). After the death of Joshua (Jg 2:6–10), the people of Israel again turned away from God by serving the Baal's, or false gods, and they “bowed down to them; and they provoked the Lord to anger” (Jg 2:12).

It often troubles people that God is presented as an angry God, because often in human relationships, anger is associated with control and abuse. But this image of God as an angry God actually reassures us that God cares for us, loves us, and is not indifferent towards us, because God's anger is not the anger of an abusive person—it is not the anger of someone with issues that have not been dealt with. God's anger is one of concern. It is that of a loving Father, concerned that his children are harming themselves with their behaviour.

God's anger is more the hurt someone feels when the person they love has been unfaithful. If a husband did not care about the unfaithfulness of his wife, or if a wife did not care about the unfaithfulness of her husband, it would be a sign that they did not love one another—an indication they were indifferent towards one another. But if they are hurt when they are betrayed, it is a sign that they care about their relationship. Likewise, God's anger at the unfaithfulness of the people of Israel is a sign that God is hurt by their unfaithfulness. It is a sign that God loves and cares for them and wants the best for them.

*Lord, help me to recognise your love for me, that I may love you in return. Amen*

**Lord, make us turn to you; let us see your face and we shall be saved.** PS 80:3

Have you noticed that our human inclination is to look away from someone who is speaking to us when the conversation is uncomfortable, awkward, or challenging? Or perhaps you have noticed the child that won't look their parents "in the face" when they know they have done something wrong. Or on the other hand, when someone gives us a compliment, we may awkwardly look away, cringe, and shrug our shoulders with indifference.

There's something about being "face-to-face" that captures the connectedness of a genuine relationship. So, too, it is with our relationship with God. We are not alone in our instinct to escape, or flee, from the face of God during challenging times.

I can remember a time where, for many years, I ran from the face of God. My mother and brother had just passed away. I didn't want to know God, let alone look at his face. Until one day, sitting before the cross, I looked up at it—face-to-face with Jesus—and felt Jesus say with his arms stretched wide, ready to embrace me: "Therese, I'm here waiting for you, come back to me!"

It is easy to want to run from God or become distracted by the challenges and struggles of life, but we can remember that our ultimate hope and salvation comes from God alone.

What is it that I'm running from? As I prepare my heart for the coming of the Saviour, how do I need to turn my face again to him to encounter his gaze of love upon me.

*Lord, make us turn to you; let us see your face and we shall be saved. Amen.*

**THERESE MILLS MGL**

**The Lord has anointed me. He has sent me.** IS 61:1

I've been leading a program of parish renewal for the past 16 months which, through a reliance on the Holy Spirit, placing evangelisation front and centre, and employing sound leadership principles to raise up lay leaders, is helping our parish to become a centre of missionary outreach. While it feels like we are still at the beginning of our journey, regular people are being activated in their gifts and experiencing a personal call to serve, give, and accompany others into relationship with Jesus.

The experience of being anointed and sent by God for a specific purpose is something the prophet Isaiah took up in deeply practical ways. Sent to the poor, the broken, captives and the imprisoned, Isaiah, like the saints, becomes a sign for us—pointing the way to both our journey and destination: finding Jesus in those to whom we're called, and actively accompanying them into union with him. They live in our midst, but often they are us.

Just think of the many people who are spiritually poor, captive to a culture which says that they have no need for an intimate, personal, life-giving relationship with Jesus (curiously, this can even sometimes be faithful Mass-goers.) We are surrounded by broken relationships in our families and communities. Many people are imprisoned by a slavery to screen-time. The poor are in our midst, we are sent to them, and we are them.

*Lord, help me to grasp the call you have placed on my life; that I may use the gifts you have given me to serve, give and accompany others into relationship with your Son, Jesus. Amen.*

**FR JOSHUA WHITEHEAD**





Christmas







## *The Nativity*

**JOHN SINGLETON COPLEY (1738–1815)**

*The Nativity* (c. 1776). Oil on canvas, 62.23cm x 76.2cm. Ernest Wadsworth Longfellow Fund. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Massachusetts, USA. Bridgeman Images.

If we thought the prophet Isaiah’s sign to the Jewish people was indeed marvellous—that a virgin would give birth to God-with-us (Is 7:14)—then we can only read with amazement the angel’s announcement to the shepherds of Bethlehem: “Do not be afraid. Look, I bring you news of great joy, a joy to be shared by the whole people. Today in the town of David (the shepherd-king) a Saviour has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord. And here is a *sign* for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger” (Lk 2:10–12).

Now, there are three *signs* within the sign. The announcement is to shepherds. Because they lived in the fields, they were considered as what we would call today, “Gypsies”—untrustworthy and thieving. And because the very nature of their life made it impossible to fulfil all the requirements of the Law (eg, attending Sabbath worship, and not working on the Sabbath), many of the scribes saw them as sinners. And yet, they are the first chosen by God to announce the birth of the divine Shepherd King. Even in death, this King would be associated with sinners—he would die crucified between two of them. The two thieves

on Calvary would symbolise the two attitudes to this Saviour of the world—acceptance and rejection.

The second *sign* would be the baby being wrapped in swaddling clothes. As William Barclay explains, “Swaddling clothes consisted of a square of cloth with a long bandage-like strip coming diagonally off from one corner. The child was first wrapped in the square of cloth and then the long strip was wound round and round about him” (*The Gospel of Luke*, 21). We cannot but call to mind the images of Egyptian mummies. And Benedict XVI would comment: “The child stiffly wrapped in bandages is seen as prefiguring the hour of his death: from the outset, he is the sacrificial victim.... The manger, then, was seen as a kind of altar” (*The Infancy Narratives*, 68). Towards the end of his Gospel, Luke again mentions the wrapping of the body—this time in a shroud (Lk 23:53). Eastern icons make the reference very obvious. They place the Baby, not in a manger, but in a miniature tomb. This child has come to die.

The third *sign* is the manger itself. It was a food box for animals. In fact, the word comes from the French “mangere”—to eat. By having the angel tell the shepherds that the infant lying in the manger is a sign, Luke is telling us to look for a deeper meaning. Jesus is the true Food for his flock. It is he who will give us the nourishment we need for life’s journey. We will never be alone.

To quote Benedict XVI again: “Augustine drew out the meaning of the manger using an idea that at first seemed almost shocking, but on closer examination, contains a profound truth. The manger is the place where animals find their food. But now, lying in the manger, is he who called himself the true bread come down from heaven, the true nourishment that we need in order to be fully ourselves” (*op. cit.*, 68). The interpretation is indeed obvious when we note that the city of David—Bethlehem—in Hebrew, means, “The house of bread.”

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Benedict makes a telling statement: “God’s poverty is his real sign” (*op. cit.*, 79). Thus, Luke begins and ends his Gospel with a Eucharistic theme. His account of Jesus’ life ends with the Emmaus story—again a story of recognition through a *sign*. The two disciples do not recognise the stranger walking beside them. Nor do they recognise him even in the living words of Scripture. They finally recognise him in the “breaking of the bread”, the first term used by the early Christians to describe the Eucharist. While Luke is indeed affirming Christ’s Presence in the consecrated food, he is also teaching Christ’s disciples, and us, that the Christ we receive in Communion is also present in our companions on the journey—and in God’s word.

John Singleton Copley was born in Boston in 1738 of Irish parents. He was largely self-taught—Boston at that time devoid of art museums and galleries. At the age of 16, he was painting portraits; George Washington sitting for him the following year. He left for Europe in 1774 when he was 36, by which time he had painted 300 pictures. He died in London, aged 77.

He worked on his *The Nativity* for two years. Interestingly, the scene contains no supernatural elements. There are no angels, no star, no haloes on the Holy Family. The only explicit indication that this is an extraordinary birth is the bright light illuminating the scene from the top left, guiding our eye toward Mary and the Child.

Hand to her forehead, Mary seems to be pondering the mystery of the Son of God taking on our messy human flesh. Her virginal purity is contrasted by the roughness of the wool and the hay, the sheepdog and the oxen. A shepherd points an index finger at the Baby as if telling his friends, “We have found the sign.” Joseph seems quite relaxed. Instead of a star, we spot a full moon, reflected serenely in a body of water. All is calm, all is bright, on this holy night.

**MSGR GRAHAM SCHMITZER**