

3. The universality of salvation

An unconditional hope

In the first two meditations of this Advent, we contemplated the Parousia of the Lord, his glorious return at the end of time, learning to live under a patient sky that never tires of showing trust in humanity. We then reflected on the possibility of building the Lord's house together, recognizing that any authentic renewal of the Church passes through the capacity to welcome differences, without succumbing to the illusion of uniformity, carrying together the weight of communion even when the voices do not immediately agree.

Now, as we draw closer to Christmas and to the conclusion of the Jubilee, we wish to turn our thoughts to a third movement of grace: the universal manifestation of salvation. It is not without significance that the Holy Door is closed on 6 January, the Solemnity of the Epiphany of the Lord. On the day when the Church celebrates the manifestation of Christ to all peoples, the Jubilee journey also comes to an end with the closing of the Holy Door. The coincidence is significant: while a visible door closes, it is strongly affirmed that Christ's salvation remains definitively open to all.

Both the Jubilee and the Nativity of the Lord present us with the same challenge: recognizing the coming of Christ in our humanity as a light to be welcomed, expanded and offered to the world. The catholicity of the Church, in its twofold and indivisible meaning, is at stake: on the one hand, possessing the fullness of Christ; on the other, being sent to the whole of humanity, without exception or exclusion. This is the hope we want to contemplate: a truly universal salvation.

1. The true light

As we journey towards the feast of the Epiphany, it is useful to recall the way in which the fourth Gospel presents the mystery of the Incarnation. Unlike Luke, who recounts the birth of Christ through concrete events – the manger, the shepherds, the singing of the angels – John raises his eyes and observes the coming of the Word from on high, like the bursting forth of true light into the world. Not any light, but that which “enlightens every man” (*John 1:9*).

It is a very powerful insight: the light of Christ manifests itself as the true light, because it is capable of illuminating, clarifying and guiding the entire complexity of human experience. It does not erase man's questions, desires and searches, but connects them, purifies them and leads them towards a fuller meaning.

However, as John himself does not fail to emphasize, this light is not accepted spontaneously. On the contrary, its appearance arouses in us an unexpected and painful resistance.

The true light that enlightens every man was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world knew him not. He came to his own home, and his own people received him not (*John 1:9-11*).

How is this possible? The world was made through the Word, yet it does not recognize him. The Word comes among his own, but his own do not welcome him. This paradox runs throughout John's Gospel: the light shines in the darkness, but the darkness resists it. Why does this happen? What makes man so resistant to the light that comes to save him?

We find the answer in the nighttime dialogue between Jesus and Nicodemus, when the Master clearly explains the profound reasons for this rejection.

The light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. For everyone who does evil hates the light, and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed. But he who does what is true comes to the light, that it may be clearly seen that his deeds have been wrought in God (*John 3:19-21*).

The problem is not the light, which by nature illuminates and vivifies, but our readiness to welcome it. Light is necessary and beautiful, but also demanding: it unmasks pretence, lays bare contradictions, and forces us to recognize what we would rather not see. This is why we often avoid it, taking refuge in the safety of the darkness that protects us.

It is important to note that Jesus does not contrast those who do evil with those who do good, but those who do evil with those who practise truth. To welcome the light of the Incarnation, it is not necessary to already be good or perfect, but to begin to practise truth in one's life: to stop hiding and to accept being seen for who one is. The Incarnation is liberating precisely because it breaks down all moralism and tells us that God is more interested in our truth than in superficial goodness. Preparing the way of the Lord means, in essence, walking in truth, with sincerity and without fear.

In the days of Christmas, it is natural that the invitations to goodness proliferate: calls for charity, generosity, and hospitality. These are right and necessary words, which belong to the vocabulary of our faith. And yet, in this Christmas marked by the Jubilee, perhaps something even more essential is asked of the Church. Not so much to add new exhortations, but to take a deeper step: to embark on a journey of greater truth.

In fact, practising the truth does not mean exhibiting moral purity or claiming impeccable consistency. Rather, it means accepting to present ourselves with sincerity, recognizing our resistance, our fragility, even the mistrust that sometimes dwells in our hearts when we discover our weakness. It is a humble and courageous gesture: to show ourselves to the world not with

a facade of solidity, but with the honesty of those who are aware of their need to be saved.

A Church that embarks on this journey does not become more fragile, but more credible. She does not lose her identity, but lets it emerge in its most evangelical form: that of authenticity. The world does not expect of us the image of flawless institution, nor yet another discourse indicating what should be done. It needs to encounter a community that, despite its imperfections and contradictions, truly lives in the light of Christ and is not afraid to show itself for what it is. This would be the true powerful gesture, the true Epiphany: to manifest Christ not in spite of our fragility, but precisely through it, because that is where his grace shines most powerfully.

2. Those who seek, find

A unique way of being true, preparing – or rather, walking – the path of the Lord, is that of the Magi, who set out on their journey from afar, following the most demanding law of all: the law of desire. In this way, the Magi show us that in order to welcome the light of Christmas, a certain distance is necessary, at times even a running start. One of the most common forms of blindness stems from the habit of looking at reality too closely, prisoners of predetermined judgments and overly established interpretations. Starting from afar sometimes allows us to see things better: with a freer, deeper gaze, more capable of surprise.

This dynamic does not concern only those who find themselves at the margins or in search, but also involves those who live permanently at the centre of ecclesial life and bear its responsibilities. Daily familiarity with roles, structures, decisions, and urgencies can, over time, narrow our outlook. We thus risk having difficulty recognizing the new signs through which God makes himself present in the life of the world. Not infrequently, it is precisely what comes “from afar”—peripheral voice, an unexpected question, a wound in the world—that restores depth and truth to our gaze.

On Christmas day we celebrate the light that has entered the world; on the Epiphany we remember that this light does not impose itself, but allows itself to be recognized. It is a real and powerful light, but it manifests itself within a history still marked by darkness and searching. Indeed, epiphany means manifestation: not a blinding glare, but a presence that offers itself to those who are willing to move. Not everyone sees it in the same way, not everyone recognizes it at the same time. The light of Christ allows itself to be encountered by those who accept to step outside themselves, to set out on a journey, to seek.

This also applies to the journey of the Church. Not everything that is true immediately appears clear, nor is everything that is evangelical immediately effective. Sometimes the truth asks to be followed even before it is fully understood. This is what happens to the Magi, who do not advance supported

by established certainties, but by a fragile star, which is nonetheless sufficient to set them on their journey.

When they reach Jerusalem, the Magi are not afraid of asking the questions that remain in their hearts.

Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we have seen his star in the East, and have come to worship him (*Matthew 2:2*).

Their movement affirms a decisive truth: to encounter the face of God made man, it is necessary to set out on a journey. This is true for every believer, but it takes on particular weight where faith is intertwined with the responsibility to protect, guide, and discern. Without a desire that remains alive, even the highest forms of service risk becoming repetitive, self-referential, incapable of surprise.

In the life of the Church, as in that of every person, we truly recognize only what we continue to seek. Desire precedes understanding and keeps the path open when the answers are not yet clear. The most fruitful passages in ecclesial history do not arise from well-calibrated strategies, but from hearts that never cease to question and to engage their questions in dialogue with the real life of the world. When this desire remains alive, the encounter with God surprises and exceeds expectations; when it dies out, even the most obvious signs risk no longer being recognized.

The star that guides the Magi thus becomes the sign of the discreet calls with which God continues to make himself present in history. It is a sign that does not impose answers, but raises questions; it does not offer immediate certainties, but opens a path. The Magi do not know the Scriptures of Israel, yet they know how to read the sky: this reminds us that God also speaks through unexpected ways, peripheral experiences, questions that arise from contact with reality and await to be heard.

The Magi make visible the Gospel promise: "He who seeks finds" (*Matthew 7:8*). But seeking is only possible if we accept to remain in pursuit, recognizing our need and keeping a space for waiting. This is how we prepare the way of the Lord: not by closing questions too quickly, but by allowing them to become the place where God comes to encounter us.

3. Remaining seated

There is a subtle, and precisely for this reason dangerous, way of avoiding the search for Christ: not by opposing it, but by remaining still. It is not a matter of openly rejecting or denying it, but rather of not setting out on the journey. It is the temptation to settle into a position that appears reassuring, made up of certainties and established habits, but which over time risks becoming a form of inner immobility. A place that seems to protect, while slowly isolating us,

often without our noticing. The Gospel story of the Magi illuminates this possibility with great clarity.

Upon hearing the news of the birth of a king, Herod is troubled, and with him all of Jerusalem. The scribes and chief priests scrupulously carry out their task: they consult the texts, offer correct interpretations, and provide accurate answers. Herod also shows himself to be attentive: he questions, calculates, and plans. Everyone seems involved, but no one takes the decisive step: setting out for Bethlehem, accepting the risk and surprise of what might happen. They prefer to delegate the task of going to the Magi, reserving the right to be informed of developments. It is the attitude of those who want to know everything without exposing themselves, remaining sheltered from the consequences of real involvement.

This dynamic concerns us directly. We live immersed in a continuous flow of information: we document ourselves, analyze, read a lot. Yet this abundance of knowledge rarely corresponds to real involvement. We know many things, but we remain distant. We observe reality without letting it touch us, protected by a position that shelters us from the unexpected. Thus, information becomes a deceptive shortcut: it makes us feel involved, while in reality it allows us to remain static.

For the Church, this risk takes on particularly delicate contours. It is possible to know the doctrine well, to preserve tradition, to celebrate the liturgy with care, and yet remain static. Like the scribes of Jerusalem, we too can know where the Lord continues to be present—in the peripheries, among the poor, in the wounds of history—without finding the strength or courage to move in that direction.

The Epiphany reminds us that only those who set out on a journey encounter the kingship of Christ. Only those who accept the risk of seeking can come to worship the Word made man. Those who remain seated, protected by their own certainties, end up missing the appointment with the manifestation of God, even when it is close and clearly indicated by the Scriptures. True light can only be welcomed to the extent that we accept, little by little, to leave our comfortable shadows, even when they have the reassuring appearance of competence, institution, or religious security that has already been acquired.

4. Arise and shine

The attitude of the Magi is different from that of Herod and his court: they are intrepid travellers who, even without knowing the Scriptures of Israel, seem to embody their most authentic spirit. Already the prophets, in the difficult time of the return from exile, had exhorted the people to set out again, when hopes for a different future still seemed distant and almost impossible. In the so-called Book of Consolation of Isaiah, proclaimed by the liturgy on the solemnity of the Epiphany, a decisive imperative resounds, leaving no room for hesitation:

Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you (*Isaiah 60:1-2*).

This is the invitation that Herod cannot obey and which, instead, sets the Magi on their journey. To encounter the Lord who has manifested himself in our humanity, the first step is always to arise: to leave our inner refuges, our securities, our established view of things. Getting up requires courage. It means abandoning the sedentary lifestyle that protects us but immobilizes us, accepting the fatigue of the journey, exposing ourselves to the uncertainty of what is not yet clear. The Magi get up, leave their land, travel distances without guarantees, guided only by a faint and discreet sign. They do not know exactly what they will find, yet they trust the light that precedes them.

After inviting them to arise, the prophet adds a surprising instruction: he asks them to clothe themselves in a light that is not yet fully visible, but which has already been promised. This alludes to an inner disposition: to live as if the light were coming, even before seeing any signs of it. This means maintaining confidence even when circumstances do not entirely justify it, continuing to hope while the night is not yet over. Only in this way is it possible to set out on a journey toward something new, accepting uncertainty and even the risk of disappointment, so as not to remain where we are.

After getting up and accepting to clothe themselves in a hope that preceded them, the Magi make a further gesture, perhaps the most decisive of all. The journey, the search, and the waiting do not lead them to self-affirmation, but to humility. The desire that set them in motion is fulfilled not in possession, but in adoration. Only then does their journey truly reach its destination.

Going into the house they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshipped him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh (*Matthew 2:11*).

Kneeling before the humble and poor sign of the child, the Magi discover that access to the other—different, fragile, unexpected—always comes from below, never from above. It is in lowering oneself that distance is bridged and diversity becomes habitable. It is not a matter of renouncing one's identity, but of surrendering it, opening it to the mystery that the other brings with him.

Getting up and then kneeling down: this is the movement of faith. We stand up to step outside ourselves, not to put ourselves at the centre. And then we lower ourselves, because we realize that what we encounter is beyond our control. This is true in our relationship with God, but also in our everyday relationships. As long as things go as we imagine, it is easy to remain; but when the other surprises us, disappoints us, or changes, remaining faithful to the

choices we have made and to the love we have promised requires us to stop imposing our point of view and learn to truly listen.

For the Church, this twofold movement—rising and bowing down—is essential. She is called to move, to go out, to encounter people and situations that are distant from her. But she is also called to know how to stop, lower her gaze, and recognize that not everything belongs to her or can be controlled. Only in this way can the gift of salvation become universal: to the extent that the Church accepts to leave her own securities and look with respect at the lives of others, recognizing that even there, often in unexpected ways, something of the light of Christ can emerge.

5. Finding oneself

When the Magi enter the house and see the child with Mary his mother, they find themselves in front of something that exceeds their expectations. They kneel and open their treasure chests, offering gold, frankincense and myrrh. With these gifts they confess in that child the presence of God, his kingship and his full sharing in their humanity, marked even by suffering and death. But, while they perform this gesture, something unexpected happens: they not only discover who that child is, they begin to understand who they are.

In the face of Jesus, God made man, the Magi glimpse that the same dignity is also promised to their lives. If God reveals himself as King in that child, then human life is also called to a greatness that does not come from power, but from care and service. If God has chosen to dwell in our flesh, then every human life carries within itself a light, a vocation, a value that cannot be erased. The gifts offered by the Magi thus become a mirror: they speak of God, but they also reveal what man is called to become.

With the visit of the Magi, the mystery of Incarnation shows all its universal force. We did not come into the world merely to survive or to pass the time in the best way possible. We were born to attain a greater life: that of children of God. The Magi set out in search of a star and found Christ; but by seeking Christ they also found themselves. They discovered that, despite coming from afar and without knowing the Scriptures, a light shone in their humanity, waiting only to be recognized and brought to light.

Perhaps the Church is called, today more than ever, to do this above all: to offer the light of Christ to the world. Not as something to be imposed or defended, but as a presence to be offered, allowing each person to approach it through a journey similar to that of the Magi. They set out from a desire, they embarked on a journey, they encountered questions and uncertainties, and only at the end did they recognize Christ and, in front of him, discover themselves too.

From this perspective, the mission does not consist of forcing the encounter, but of making it possible. Offering light means safeguarding the space for searching, allowing desire to set itself in motion, accompanying without

anticipating the answers. Thus, the encounter with Christ does not erase the humanity of those who seek him, but brings it to light and fulfills it.

If we have the courage to offer such a simple and shining witness to the world, we may experience what the prophet Isaiah announces to the ruins of Jerusalem: a city called to become a place of attraction for all peoples.

Nations shall come to your light,
and kings to the brightness of your rising.
Lift up your eyes round about and see,
they all gather together, they come to you;
your sons shall come from far,
and your daughters shall be carried in the arms.
Then you shall see and be radiant,
your heart shall thrill and rejoice;
because the abundance of the sea shall be turned to you,
the wealth of nations shall come to you (*Isaiah 60:3-5*).

A Church that offers Christ's presence to everyone does not appropriate his light, but reflects it. She does not place itself at the center to dominate, but to attract. And precisely for this reason, she becomes a place of encounter, where everyone can recognize Christ and, before him, rediscover the meaning of their own life.

This perspective forces us to rethink many of our missionary habits. We often imagine that evangelizing means bringing something that is lacking, filling a void, correcting a mistake. The Epiphany points to another way: helping others recognize the light that already dwells within them, the dignity they already possess, the gifts they already hold. It is not we who "give" Christ to the world, as if we had exclusive rights to him. We are called to make his presence visible with such clarity and truth that everyone can recognize in him the meaning of their own existence.

This does not relativize the truth of Christ or reduce the Gospel to a generic appreciation of humanity. On the contrary, it takes seriously the catholicity of the Church in its deepest meaning: to guard Christ in order to offer him to everyone, with the confidence that beauty, goodness, and truth are already present in every person, called to be fulfilled and to find their fullest meaning in him. The true light of Christmas "enlightens every man" precisely because it is able to reveal to each person his or her own truth, his or her own calling, his or her own likeness to God.

This would be the most eloquent sign of a Church faithful to her vocation: not to keep the light for herself, but to let it shine so that the new life already planted in the heart of every man and every woman, may finally germinate and bear fruit.

Let us pray

O God, who by the guidance of the star revealed your only-begotten Son to the nations, graciously lead us too, who have already known you through faith, to contemplate the beauty of your glory. Through Christ our Lord.

Fr. Roberto Pasolini, OFM Cap.
Preacher of the Papal Household