

The Work of Adoration

An Advent Communion Meditation by the Rev. John P. Dick

It was a delight to happen across an article last week that was written by a friend and former colleague from the Cincinnati area, Dennis Johnson. (Dennis Johnson. “The Call Over the Long Haul.” Minister Magazine. Fall, 2009. Pg. 2) In his article, Dennis made reference to a trip to Florence, Italy, that he and his wife enjoyed a few years ago. One of the highlights was their stop at the Uffizi Museum, the oldest art gallery in the world. Some of the greatest works of the Renaissance are housed there.

Dennis spoke of roaming the halls and eventually coming upon room fifteen, which contains works by the young Leonardo da Vinci. And that’s where he saw it... one of the most important paintings in all of Italy. It is called *Adoration of the Magi*.

In 1481, da Vinci was commissioned to paint this masterpiece for a monastery near Florence. It’s a large painting on wood, nearly eight feet square. Evidently, he completed the underdrawing but left for Milan without finishing the project. Only a portion is painted, and that much later by a hand other than da Vinci’s.

Johnson said that what touched him was the fact that it was never finished by Leonardo. Yet that’s what makes it so important. You see, da Vinci leaves the ongoing task of finishing the work of “adoration” in our hands.

I love that image, don’t you, and I think my friend is right. We all have a responsibility to lend ourselves to the vocation of adoration... we need to add color and emotion and meaning to this portrait. We all need to lend our voices to the chorus of old... *O come let us adore him, Christ the Lord*. And I wonder... is there any better time than the present to allow ourselves the gift of adoration?

The advent season has arrived. It is week #1. I know it doesn’t feel that way. When the calendar falls as it does this year it seems very hurried. We have just enjoyed Thanksgiving and now we begin the journey to Bethlehem. But ready or not, it’s here. Advent always falls on the Sunday closest to November 30 and guess what... that’s tomorrow.

Those who are given to proper order in the Christian calendar understand that we are beginning a new liturgical year today. Advent, taken from the Latin “adventus,” means we will soon be “coming to” or “arriving” at Bethlehem. This all started back in the 6th century when the Catholic church evidently used this as a time for repentance. I guess they saw it somewhat the same way we see the season of Lent today. Yet even though there was this somber dimension to advent, the greater purpose was given to the joyful preparation for Christmas. Hence, as you saw at the beginning of the service... when lighting the advent wreath to begin the four week journey to our Lord’s birth... the theme was centered upon joy.

Isn't it fun to get a sense of the traditions that have unfolded over time... traditions that seek to enhance the meaning of our worship experience? That's why I thought that as we come to the communion table today, it would be a good time to speak to another sacred story that has to do with the adoration of Jesus. It's found in the 4th chapter of John's gospel and focuses upon a very unlikely person who ultimately led the way to both the stable and the table.

What's her name, you ask? (You were wondering, weren't you?) Sadly, I can't tell you because she is referred to only as the *Woman of Samaria*. Yet hers is a story that extends beyond all boundaries and reaches out to touch the world. Hers is a story of adoration and its lesson takes focus through the words of Jesus. **“But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.”** (John 4:23)

Let's get closer to this encounter between Jesus and the woman. The setting is a well in a Samaritan city called Sychar. Neither Jesus nor the woman had ever met. But by the end of the day... at the conclusion of their conversation things were very different. Jesus came to see into her soul and understood that she was a woman who was hurting. He grew to understand she was a failure when it came to relationships and was one who was despised by her community. Yet at the center of it all, he also knew she was a woman of worth who was seeking to define herself. Though she was empty and broken, she understood life had more to offer and grew to sense in her conversation with this stranger that he just might be able to open those possibilities before her. So as they visit it gradually grows clear. This is an incredibly special person to whom she is speaking, and it is a revelation that slowly evolves through the context of their conversation.

For example, when first they met she simply saw before her a Jew. And that didn't mean much to her because she was a Samaritan. The racial division was significant and she held little respect for the one standing before her. But I note as this story unfolds that it isn't long until the weary woman is referring to her new found friend as “Sir.”

It was a sign of respect to be sure, but more than that an early indication as John tells the story that her heart was awakening from within. Then as the course of their conversation continues to unfold she gains yet another insight. Looking at Jesus she says, **“Sir, I see that you are a prophet.”** She has taken yet another step up the relational ladder. Now this is not simply a stranger to be respected but this is a man of spiritual consequence. She sees in him one who has the ability to understand life in its larger sacred dimensions. This is someone who has insight into her like no one ever before. And it leads to her final and ultimate revelation.

After Jesus helps her to understand the power of worship with a confessional tone she says with an air of astonishment... **“I know that Messiah is coming... when he comes, he will proclaim all things to us.”** And here John helps us see that the transition is complete. Jesus responds and says, **“I am he, the one who is speaking to you.”**

Do you see what happened? This lifeless woman at the well had no sense of self esteem and no hope in her future. Yet in the course of a few minutes, she came to discover that the hour

was coming when the true worshipers would worship God in spirit and truth... Put another way, she took her place in the chorus to sing, *O come let us adore him, Christ the Lord.*

What a wonderful story... a hallowed reminder that the time is now here to bring adoration to the Lord because the Messiah is alive and well. Yes, the Messiah has come into our world to lead us into a new day. This "Anointed One" has been showing the way for the last 2,000 years. And here we are together worshipping the Father in spirit and truth... bringing our adoration to the little one born in a stable and our quiet repentance to the Holy One at this blessed table. Some things that ultimately matter never change, do they?

In just a few minutes we are going to make our way to this table as a symbol of our worship. In a sense, just like that woman of long ago, we're going to be coming to the well seeking living water trusting that God will quench our thirst with a spiritual reality leading us to eternal life. Today, we're standing in the presence of the Messiah and taking part in his spirit and truth. And who knows, as we stand before the Anointed One we just may come alive in a way we never would have thought possible. The songs of the season may echo their melodies within our minds and hearts and we may just find our place within the adoration of the magi.

I know the Messiah is coming, she said. May we ever say the same!