

Readers' Notes

The Nativity at Night

National Gallery, London



Painting title: The Nativity at Night.

Artist: Geertgen tot Sint Jans

Date: Painted c.1490.

Location: Room 63, Sainsbury Wing, National Gallery.

Medium: Oil on oak.

<https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/geertgen-tot-sint-jans-the-nativity-at-night>

Introduction

At the beginning of Advent we have a great sense of anticipation, we are waiting and watching, praying and reflecting. It is good to be reminded at the start of this year's Advent of precisely why we are doing these things; of the journeying within our hearts, within our homes and within our churches. Journeying to the destination that is the Christ-child. So, this remarkable painting, right here in the National Gallery, in the centre of London, helps to stop us in our Advent tracks.

The Dutch artist, Geertgen tot Sint Jans which means 'little Gerard of Saint John', pulls at our heartstrings with this tender scene of absolute contemplation. It's as if the painting has frozen in time to take stock of this miracle in the darkness of the night. This is a believer's Nativity, whose palette is prayer. It is a mystic attempt to imagine that unique holy night.

The perfect revelation

The darkness is illuminated by Jesus in the manger: the golden glow around his body lights up an array of adoring angels, each with individual hand gestures as if they're all marvelling at different insights that have aroused their senses. Mary's face is entirely focused on her baby, pondering all that has happened, yet also wondering what is about to happen. Yet there is no stress in this scene, we do not feel that Mary and Joseph are exhausted from their long journey, although they must be, we do not sense that they're worrying about food or money, yet they must be... Joseph simply stands in the shadows clutching his heart in awe while guarding his precious family from the midnight air. All around this humble, wooden enclosure hangs the deepest darkest night of perfect revelation.

St Bridget of Sweden

The idea of the infant Christ illuminating the Nativity scene comes from the writings of the 14th-century Saint Bridget of Sweden. She wrote that in her visions she saw that the light of the new-born child was so bright 'that the sun was not comparable to it'. A century later, artists such as Geertgen here were inspired by this vision to depict the contrasts of extreme light and shade as naturally as they could, to heighten the physical and visual senses of this miraculous birth. Therefore, we notice at the top of the painting, the radiance of the white angel announcing the birth to the shepherds on the distant hillside that provides another contrast between earthly darkness and divine light. A third and much smaller source of light comes from the shepherds' fire in the top left, barely flickering at all.

Are we ready for the Christ-child?

Although this painting is actually our journey's end this Advent, it shows us that we need to slow down. We must not hurry to reach Christ before we are ready, before he is ready to be born. Notice the considerable amount of space all around Jesus in his bed; we need space to see him, to adore him and he needs space to reach out to us all, wherever we are in this world. And in that space - enters grace. Grace is given to us freely, lovingly by Christ but we don't notice grace if our hearts are too distracted. So the space around Jesus invites us to create space in our busy lives, space to receive his grace and space to welcome his birth.

Showing the Nativity at the start of Advent also teaches us another important lesson. While we live with the tension of waiting for Christ's birth these coming four weeks, we are reminded that we're also waiting for his second coming as well. While we know we will rejoice at his incarnation on Christmas Day we must still live in Advent anticipation until his second coming is fulfilled. Therefore, to encounter the Christ child is both an experience of gratitude and of future hope. This mystery is at the heart of our faith and in the heart of our

Mother, Mary, as she holds her hands not in readiness to pick her baby up but in quiet prayer.

Mary's loving gaze

It is a remarkably small painting as you can see, yet its power transcends both its size and its muted shades. There are no bright colours, no dramatic shapes, all is very simply conveyed between angel wings and Mary's loving gaze, between ox and ass breathing the baby warm and Joseph supporting his wife from behind. It must have been so very cold that night yet nothing stirs here, except in their hearts, and in our hearts.

Today we set foot on our Advent journey and while many of us know what the word Advent means - from the Latin word for an "arrival" or a "coming", the origins of Christmas are less well known – the feast of Christmas or Christ-Mass is second only to Easter in the Liturgical Calendar. We might be surprised to find that Christmas was not celebrated by the early Christians. The custom was to celebrate a saint's birth into eternal life i.e. their death. So Good Friday (Christ's death) and Easter Sunday (His Resurrection) became the focus of commemoration. To this day, the Catholic Church only celebrates three birthdays: *Christmas*; the *birth of the Blessed Virgin Mary* and the *Birth of John the Baptist*.

The Divine watermark

Yet Jesus is not confined to the New Testament. His coming was predicted by many women and men long before the Gospels were ever written. There is a sort of divine 'watermark' running through the Old Testament that gradually reveals the Messiah's arrival. So this beautiful painting symbolises all that longing and waiting for the Messiah as much as it does his birth. That is why it conveys so much poise, as if the world is suspended in time for this one remarkable moment; and we the viewer are invited to offer praise at its glory.

The God who Speaks: The Year of the Word

As we embark on a new flowering of the Word in all our dioceses this Advent, *The God who Speaks* speaks to us this Advent through these prayers, activities and reflections. So take a look around our website and share these resources with your families and parishes, schools and communities as we wait in prayer and peace for Christ to be born anew.

Advent Prayer

Eternal God,
in the psalms of David,
in the words of the prophets,
in the dream of Joseph
your promise is spoken.
At last, in the womb of the Virgin Mary your Word takes flesh.

Teach us to welcome Jesus, the promised Emmanuel, and to preach the good news of his coming,
that every age may know him
as the source of redemption and grace.

Grant this through him whose coming is certain,
whose day draws near:
your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ,
who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, God for ever and ever.
Amen

Questions for a Group Discussion

Opening Prayer

Pilgrim God,
you walk alongside us
and speak to us throughout the Scriptures:
 in the message of the prophets,
 the songs of David
 and the vision of Paul.
Your Son, Jesus Christ, listens to our hopes and fears
and shows us how to live:
 in our love of neighbour
 our desire for justice,
 and in our dying and rising each day.
Send us the Holy Spirit to open our hearts and minds
so that we may be your witnesses throughout the world:
 in our protection of the vulnerable,
 our words and actions
 and in our communion with the earth.
Amen

Questions

1. What strikes you about this painting?
2. How might its contrast between darkness and light enrich your faith?
3. Looking at the space around the baby Jesus, what can we be inspired to do in our parishes and communities to create space for Christ this Advent?
4. How can we make these ideas happen?

Closing Prayer

Our Father...
Hail Mary...

V. Your word is our path and your truth is our light.
R. This day and every day.

Our Lady of the Annunciation	pray for us
St Matthew	pray for us.
St Jerome	pray for us.
Amen.	