

HOMILY - EPIPHANY - 2004

Today is the feast of the Epiphany, the glorious event that occurred 2000 odd years ago as magi from the east visited the child Jesus and His family in their newly established home in Bethlehem. And, while they did come some weeks after the shepherds, we rightfully see them as filling out the nativity scene by bringing in a figure of the gathering of nations before Jesus. And we can well profit by reflecting on the journey of the magi from its first beginnings, through their dealings with the court in Jerusalem, to their joy at the sight of Jesus and their offerings of gifts, and finally their return home, and asking how that journey reflects elements of our own life as Christians.

First, the magi were likely pagans or maybe vague believers in one God who knew virtually nothing about God's People or His promises to them, for they had to ask about the prophecies of Scripture. But even in the darkness of ignorance, they sought the true God; some flame of grace sparked a holy desire in their hearts. They experienced the primordial light of faith at the beginning of a new creation. And so they set forth, away from the comforts of home into a journey whose end they did not see, but whose end they know was glorious. We have the knowledge of God's people and His promises that they did not. But we also remember that, as they were far from the knowledge contained in Scripture and God's people, so we (even with that knowledge) are far from the knowledge that the angels and saints have in the company of God Himself. God and His court of heaven are partially known to us, but are still a mystery. And we should constantly remember that this earth is not our final home, and that we should not seek final comfort here. The journey through this life, as with any journey, especially those of ancient times, will involve difficulties and struggles, and we progress towards an end that we do not see. But we know that it is glorious, more than the human mind can comprehend.

To fulfill their journey, the magi consulted with King Herod and the court in Jerusalem. Sadly many of those with whom they consulted were basically worldlings, especially the vicious and power hungry King Herod. And so, rather than rejoicing at the birth of the new born king, they were disturbed at the potential for a disruption in their lives. Nevertheless, the magi took what knowledge they could offer. But, warned by an angel, they became wary of Herod and returned by another path. Likewise, we are meant to accept what good there is in the world, to deal with secular society, and to use whatever valuable knowledge they can impart, of history, science, government, and so forth. And we are certainly meant to give to the world the reasons for our joy, as the first letter of Peter says. But we must be careful not to buy into the values of the world, or any immoral or dishonest behavior that may be favored by the world, knowing that doing so would endanger the life of Christ within us.

When the magi saw the child Jesus, even in a humble house in Bethlehem, they were filled with joy. They were ready to experience the newborn king and Savior wherever He could be found. Likewise, we should be open to the experience of the presence God in any time and place, and especially in the Eucharist made present at every Mass. It is certainly true that even if a Christian is open to God's presence, he will not always feel emotionally a vivid sense of the divine. The greatest of saints, including Mother Theresa went long times without this sense. But often it is the case that we do not sense God's presence in their lives and do not see the divine, because we are so wrapped up in distractions and lesser pursuits that we do not seek it. When

we set aside time for God in prayer and good works, when we have the humility to recognize that God can work in our lives in any fashion, when we are willing to tell God, “I will be joyful on Your terms, which may not be the conditions I would choose” when we are willing to do these things, we too can experience the profound joy of the magi as they saw the Lord and Savior of human history in the form of a child in the humble house of the Holy Family.

They then offered the child Jesus gold, frankincense and myrrh. Gold was both a gift fitting for a newborn king, and a very practical gift, helping the Holy Family in their future exile to Egypt, as well as their return and establishment of a new home in Nazareth. Frankincense was used in worship, and, along with the magi’s worship, reflects their recognition that they were beholding more than an earthly king. Myrrh is perhaps the most surprising gift. It was used for burials, including Christ’s own as recorded in the Gospel of John. It reflects an understanding that Jesus’ mission would not be easy and would involve suffering and death. The joy of the Good News, should also inspire us to offer Jesus what we can. At times, we offer more practical things, such as donations and service to Him and others. At times we offer Him our worship, time in prayer, our sacrifice of praise. And at times, we offer Him like myrrh penances for sins, and even make an offering of our sufferings in life, knowing that they unite us to the sacrifice of Jesus on the Cross.

After offering the gifts, the magi then returned home. For, because this life is a pilgrimage, the satisfaction of remaining in contemplation before Jesus and the Holy Family was an image of their final goal, but not the goal itself. No, they still had a mission in the world, to prepare their lands for the reception of the Good News that they had experienced. After their lives, they would return again before the throne of heaven, to see Jesus again, now as their savior who redeemed them on the Cross. Likewise, when we had a strong sense of God’s presence in prayer or in our lives, we are meant to thank Him for it and to stay for awhile to give God a chance to work a change in our lives. But we do not simply stay there; we return to our families, occupations, and legitimate interests in life, now enriching them with the faithfulness, fortitude, cheerfulness, and grace received by the experience of the divine. And we thus journey through this world but not limited to this world, anticipating the time when the words of the Isaiah and the psalmist are fulfilled and every nation is gathered again to adore God and take up the celebration at His presence among us into the ages of the ages.