

Homily-Epiphany

This Sunday we celebrate the Feast of the Epiphany. The Epiphany celebrates the manifestation of Christ to the nations.

The first reading speaks of the glory of Jerusalem being manifest to the nations. The first reading is taken from the end of the Book of Isaiah. This section of Isaiah was written after the exiles had returned home from the Exile in Babylon.

God's splendor bursts forth for the returning exiles as Jerusalem rises up in splendor. A thick cloud covers the other peoples. They are drawn to Israel. Jerusalem will light the way not only for its own inhabitants; it now provides a welcome refuge for all others. All people from near and far come to the holy city, bearing their priceless gifts: riches from the sea, caravans of camels bulging with treasures, gold, frankincense and wealth beyond measure.

The second reading is taken from the Book of Ephesians. In the early church there was a struggle as to how Gentiles, non-Jews, would become part of the new way. Many held that for Gentiles to become truly Christian they had to live the Jewish Law. The author of Ephesians states that now Gentiles are co-heirs with Jews and members of the same body and sharers of the promise through the preaching of the gospel (Ephesians 3:5-6).

These two readings give us background to help us understand the Gospel which is the story of the Magi. This is a story which has captured the imagination of Christians from around the world for the past two thousand years. As Matthew writes this story the question that he attempts to answer is "Who is Jesus?" In the context of Matthew's Gospel it is found after the genealogy of Jesus which rooted Jesus in the life of the Jewish people as Jesus descended from Abraham. The genealogy shows as well that Jesus is in the line of David. Matthew thereby shows that Jesus is the Son of David. The people awaited a Messiah who was in the line of David. Matthew shows that Jesus is the Messiah for whom the people await.

The story of the magi has captured the imagination of peoples throughout the world for two thousand years. Many get caught up in trying to understand the details of the story or filling in the details and lose the larger meaning of the story. Scripture scholars have tried to figure out whether the star that guided the Magi was a supernova, a comet or the convergence of two planets. The mysterious nature of the story has led people to decide that there are three members of the magi and that they are kings or wise men. Tradition has even named the three and named the areas of the world from which they travel. A better approach to understanding the story is to ask is, "How did Matthew understand the story and why did he write it for his community?" As mentioned in the paragraph above, the story answers the question, "Who is Jesus?"

The renowned scripture scholar Raymond Brown holds that the author of the story of the Magi uses a story in the Old Testament Book of Numbers to show that Jesus is the Messiah in the line of David. The story in the Book of Numbers also shows from where comes the motif of the rising star in the story of the magi. During the journey of the Israelites through the Transjordanian region on the way to the Promised Land, Moses encounters a wicked king who tried to destroy him. Frightened by the size of the Israelite people as they journey through his kingdom, Balak, the king of Moab, summoned from the East a well known seer named Balaam who was a non-Israelite. In Jesus' time he would have been known as a magus. He and his servants came but instead of cursing Moses and Israel, he delivered a positive prophecy of the future:

"There shall come a man out of Israel's seed, and he shall rule many nations...I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not close: a star shall rise from Jacob, and a man [scepter] shall come forth from Israel (Numbers 24:17)."

The passage was seen as referring to David and came to be seen as a messianic passage. The rising star would be seen as a symbol of the Jesus who was the Messiah.

The Gospel tells the fulfillment of this prophecy with a vivid story. The exotic visitors from the East, who come with their priceless gifts for the newborn Christ, signal the **welcome of all peoples in God's embrace**. The gift of the Christ is to all, Jew and Gentile alike, as the author of the letter to the Hebrews also insists. This author, who writes in Paul's name, continues to assert as did Paul, that **God's grace, made known first to the Jews, is now revealed to all**. The birth of this Jewish child has meaning for all people.

Early Christians believed that faith was offered to all people. The Magi's role as pre-figuring the acceptance of Gentiles into the Christian community points toward the universal character of the Gospel. The Gospel is to be shared with all people. Fittingly, at the end of Matthew's Gospel Jesus tells the disciples to go out and make disciples of all the nations. At the end of the scene the disciples do homage to Jesus.

The Gentiles in Matthew's community would be impressed by the actions of the Magi as they were non-Jews and yet undertook an arduous journey to find Jesus. Upon finding him they prostrated themselves before him and gave him gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh.

National Migration Week

The Bishops of the United States have designated this week National Migration Week. What type of welcome do we give to undocumented immigrants who live and work in the United States and the 14 million refugees worldwide? Like the foreign Magi, these newcomers bear gifts of immeasurable value for the whole community.

The celebration of the Epiphany allows us to continue to pray for the migrants who live among us but also the growth of the Church throughout the world.

It also allows us to reflect on our church as a universal church. The image of the Magi who bring gifts to Jesus reminds us that all peoples have gifts to bring Christ and His Church. The living out of the faith will bring gifts from the various nations on earth. Differences in music, in worship style are gifts that believers from all nations and cultures bring to the risen Christ. The magi symbolize each of us and the gifts that we bring to the church as Americans. The church began from Judaism. It has been transformed into a universal church in which all have something to give to the church. It grew into a church which was centered in Rome and highly European. With the growth of the Church in North America, Latin America, Africa and Asia the Church sees itself as a truly universal Church. The challenge of the members of our Church is appreciate and be open to the gifts that all bring to the Church.

Mysterious Ending

The Magi take part in an arduous journey through the desert. They do not know their final destination. They have a desire to find this newborn king. God guides the Magi. After finding the king they give him gifts and go back home. Do the magi continue to follow Jesus and to worship him? There is mystery in how they come to Jesus and what their future holds.

The story speaks about our own lives. Our lives are a journey to find Christ. God guides us. How well will we live the faith that we have in the risen Christ and how well will we share the gift of faith that we have been given?