

HOMILY FEAST OF THE EPIPHANY

“Stargazers and Temple Dwellers”

(Isaiah 60:1-6; Psalm 72; Ephesians 3:2-3, 5-6; Matthew 2:1-12)

Do you remember when a space craft first landed a little rover on the surface of the planet Mars? The news of that historic event that year came the morning of the Epiphany. I for one felt great excitement, an excitement that I compared to the joy the magi felt when they arrived in Jerusalem and found the Christ child.

To experience that same joy and excitement today, be a stargazer, not a temple dweller. Put your humble faith in Jesus; recognize and serve him in others, and you will find joy.

While the Mars landing led to excitement; the Magi felt that plus something more lasting: They sought Jesus; found him; believed in him; worshipped him, and returned home full of joy to serve him.

This is our task as well – seek him; believe in him; worship and love him; and then follow him in service. That will lead us to experience joy. The old catechism put it this way – we are on earth to know, love and serve God, in one another.

The Magi were stargazers, open to wonder, awe, newness, adventure, and so they came to Jerusalem, following their intuition and the star. Herod and the Jewish leadership, on the other hand, were Temple dwellers, comfortable with the status quo, in control of life, not open to change, and so they automatically resisted the newness of a child king.

Matthew will consider hypocrisy the chief sin of the Jewish leadership, already present in their initial encounter. By contrast, the Magi are obedient in following the star and act rather than merely hear. Revelation outside of scripture motivates them to obey the one God, yet they do not find their way to Jesus without Scripture.

The task of the Church is often to discern the ultimate quest that is expressed in non-biblical and non-theistic ways in contemporary life, and continue Matthew’s witness that the yearnings even of those who do not know fully what they seek, are met in the act of God at Bethlehem.

The reality of many people in today’s complex world is that of an existential angst; a restlessness, a dis-ease. There is something missing in their lives. There is a spirituality of human incompleteness. Life is an unfinished symphony. As St. Augustine put it, “Our hearts are restless, Oh God, until they rest in thee.”

There is a certain mystery involved here. St. Paul in his letter to the Ephesians today puts it well. He speaks of a commission of God’s grace given to him to demonstrate how the mystery was made known to the prophets and the apostles by the Holy Spirit – that now, through faith in Christ, Jews and Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same Body, and sharers in the promise of Christ.

For the first time in history, tribalism, narrow nationalism, divisive ethnicity, false pride, the addiction to revenge, our own sin and sinfulness – all human darkness, has been overcome. Through humble faith in Christ, and love for each other, we can be one people, all related, brothers and sisters in Christ.

All it takes is for us to be stargazers and not Temple dwellers. We must have humble faith in the Christ child who is also Risen Lord and savior of the world. We must have the courage to journey into our own darkness, admit it, name it, deal with it through forgiveness and healing, and we will experience that new world order that Jesus came to bring about.

The magi did not simply admire or study the star – they followed it, even to the point of resisting the enthroned powers that be. Yet their action is a response to the divine initiative. Here, as elsewhere, God's grace precedes human action.

The magi are gentiles in the extreme, characters far removed from the Jewish heritage and worldview. From the very beginnings of Jesus' life, then, we see the dividing walls between races and cultures breaking down. Even here, at the beginning of the gospel, the mission to all nations that will close the gospel is anticipated.

Why would we wait one more day? Today we can let go of false pride, stubborn selfishness, our petty sins and our tendency to sin, and turn to Jesus for forgiveness and healing. Like the Magi, we are then called to return home to a new life of reconciliation with one another, marked by acceptance, compassion, genuine communication, understanding, love and forgiveness. The peace and joy will then automatically be ours, no matter how much darkness there continues to be in a world that still resists this simple truth.

A Greek monk wanted all his life to make a pilgrimage to the Holy Sepulchre, to walk three times around it, to kneel and return home a new person. He worked and begged in the village, saved his money and finally towards the end of his life had enough money to make the trip. No sooner had he started out than he met a poor beggar in rags, who when he found out where he was going and how much money he had for the trip, thirty pounds, begged that of him to feed his wife and kids. The beggar asked him to walk around him three times, kneel and return to his monastery a new man. The monk pondered a few moments, then did so, and went back to his monastery. He did return home a new person, having recognized that the beggar was Christ himself, not in some magical place far away, but right outside the monastery door, mysteriously close. In abandoning his quest for the remote, the special, the somehow magical, the monk discovered a meaning far more profound in the ordinary experience close to home. All that he had given up came suddenly rushing back to him with a joy unforeseen.

Mr. Theresa of Calcutta had a succinct way of putting her understanding of this mystery of new life. She simply advised us to do to the person we can see what we would want to do to Jesus whom we cannot see, and we would be doing it to Jesus.

It is here in the Eucharist that we seek and find Jesus; know and believe in him and his presence; experience his love and caring for us, and are empowered to go out to spread that love of God for all, to build up his Body, the Church.

So, seek no further. Dare to be a stargazer. Just have faith; believe, let Jesus be ruler of your life. Know, love and serve Him in others, and you will find a life full of meaning and joy.