

FIRST READING: Isaiah 60:1-6

A reading from the Book of the Prophet Isaiah 60:1-6

Rise up in splendor, Jerusalem! Your light has come, the glory of the Lord shines upon you. See, darkness covers the earth, and thick clouds cover the peoples; but upon you the LORD shines, and over you appears his glory. Nations shall walk by your light, and kings by your shining radiance. Raise your eyes and look about; they all gather and come to you: your sons come from afar, and your daughters in the arms of their nurses. Then you shall be radiant at what you see, your heart shall throb and overflow, for the riches of the sea shall be emptied out before you, the wealth of nations shall be brought to you. Caravans of camels shall fill you, dromedaries from Midian and Ephah; all from Sheba shall come bearing gold and frankincense, and proclaiming the praises of the LORD.

The word of the Lord.

RESPONSORIAL: Psalm 72:1-2, 7-8, 10-11, 12-13.

Lord, every nation on earth will adore you.

O God, with your judgment endow the king, and with your justice, the king's son; He shall govern your people with justice and your afflicted ones with judgment.

Lord, every nation on earth will adore you.

Justice shall flower in his days, and profound peace, till the moon be no more. May he rule from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth.

Lord, every nation on earth will adore you.

The kings of Tarshish and the Isles shall offer gifts; the kings of Arabia and Seba shall bring tribute. All kings shall pay him homage, all nations shall serve him.

Lord, every nation on earth will adore you.

For he shall rescue the poor when he cries out, and the afflicted when he has no one to help him. He shall have pity for the lowly and the poor; the lives of the poor he shall save.

Lord, every nation on earth will adore you.

SECOND READING: Ephesians 3:2-3a, 5-6

A reading from the Letter of Saint Paul to the Ephesians:

Brothers and sisters: You have heard of the stewardship of God's grace that was given to me for your benefit, namely, that the mystery was made known to me by revelation. It was not made known to people in other generations as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit: that the Gentiles are coheirs, members of the same body, and copartners in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.

The word of the Lord.

GOSPEL: Matthew 2:1-12

+ A reading from the holy Gospel according to Matthew:

When Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, in the days of King Herod, behold, magi from the east arrived in Jerusalem, saying, "Where is the newborn king of the Jews? We saw his star at its rising and have come to do him homage." When King Herod heard this, he was greatly troubled, and all Jerusalem with him. Assembling all the chief priests and the scribes of the people, He inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. They said to him, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for thus it has been written through the prophet: And you, Bethlehem, land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; since from you shall come a ruler, who is to shepherd my people Israel." Then Herod called the magi secretly and ascertained from them the time of the star's appearance. He sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and search diligently for the child. When you have found him, bring me word, that I too may go and do him homage." After their audience with the king they set out. And behold, the star that they had seen at its rising preceded them, until it came and stopped over the place where the child was. They were overjoyed at seeing the star, and on entering the house they saw the child with Mary his mother. They prostrated themselves and did him homage. Then they opened their treasures and offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed for their country by another way.

The Gospel of the Lord.

Reflection for Epiphany

The feast of Epiphany can also be called "Little Christmas." It used to mark the end of the Season of Christmas. Since the renewal of the Second Vatican Council in the late 1950s to the early 1960s, the season ends with the Baptism of the Lord, also called the Feast of Theophany. Both of these names have their origin in ancient Greek. Epi is a preposition meaning upon. Phany comes from the word phaino which means to shine or appear. The origin of theo is the word theos which means God. Epiphany can mean I shine or shine upon me. Theophany can mean God shines or appears. On this feast, we have the first manifestation of Jesus as God, or at least this is how we interpret the story of the Magi's visit. I maintain that it's only a teaser, like the scenes for next week's show.

The gospel of John does this in another way. Instead of telling Jesus' origin story and the events these stories tell, he focused on Jesus' deeds as signs that point to Jesus identity as Messiah, Savior, Son and God. Jesus' story began with John the Baptist's witness on his behalf. Jesus first sign was in Cana in Galilee. He changed water into wine at a wedding celebration when wedding guests had drunk up the existing supply. As he put it to his mother, "Woman, what do you want from me? My hour has not come yet." (John 2:4 New Jerusalem Bible) This happened when Jesus was an adult and just before he went public with his mission. His sign was also a teaser of what was yet to happen.

Part of the reason that the Catholic Church changed its calendar came from the similarity of the themes of Epiphany and Jesus' Baptism. In Matthew, pagans proclaim Jesus' identity and link the narrative to Isaiah's prophesy. That Jesus is the fulfillment of the Law and Prophets is an underlying theme of Matthew. With Jesus' baptism, John, the last of the great Jewish prophets

does the same. Enough of this now, I will write more on this theme for next week. I give teasers too.

All of us can have a notion of what epiphany means. An epiphany can be a sudden insight or dawning idea. This is what I seek each time I prepare a homily or one of these reflections that I write. Since both of these are based upon the scriptures and it's my responsibility through them to reflect and express their meaning, I rely upon prayer and reflection. Hopefully, as a result, God works through my efforts to speak or write. If there is any inspiration in them, it is by the grace of the Holy Spirit. If there is, through the work of the Spirit, my epiphany or insight can be a theophany through which God can work. These experiences are not just mine either. With a bit of reflection all of us can have such an epiphany of God's grace.

Being believers, an epiphany that reveals God to us did not just happen to other people who lived long ago and far away, the Holy Spirit works now, through, with, in and among us now. Epiphany is not just the journey of the Magi, it is our journey too. Our journey lasts a lifetime and is not one that takes months of miles but the mere space from our heads to our hearts and the distance between us and another person. God is always near us, a mere thought away. I like to set a reference point for today's feast. That point includes our own experiences. The Spirit works in us too.

Isaiah has made a city, Jerusalem, as the center of today's passage. Jerusalem was in ruins and those Jews, in Diaspora, who returned there, were a mere remnant. Today, people flock to it in pilgrimage and as tourists. Somehow, I don't think that's what Isaiah meant. With his image of caravans, gold and incense, he seems to point to the magi's pilgrimage to encounter the newborn king of the Jews in Bethlehem. What truth do Isaiah's words reveal? Each time I have read this passage I hear the promise of the return of Jesus and the establishment of the Kingdom of God, which is yet to come. What Isaiah preached has not yet happened. His prophesy is in the process of unfolding with us as witnesses.

The coming of the Magi was not the end of Jesus' story. As a baby, his life's work had not yet begun. He still had to grow up in knowledge, wisdom and to know his Father's presence and plan. Jesus was not born with prescience. The point of the Incarnation was that God became a human being like us in all but sin. He was fully reliant upon his parents like any other infant, toddler and child. His only difference was that he never sinned. There were perks to being God-made-human and perks for his parents as well. Only as an adult did Jesus ministry and mission truly show itself. The Epiphany was a mere hint of what we would witness.

Isaiah's prophesy has unfolded, but has not yet come to completion. The Pauline Christian communities revealed part of Isaiah's message. Paul incorporated Jewish and Gentile members together in Christ. They gathered together in Christ as his Church. Christ was their center not a city. Paul had a similar vision to Isaiah. Yet, neither's vision is fully established. Here we are millennia later. We still only catch glimpses of the promise. The full promise of God will be completed with Jesus' return at the end of the age with the full establishment of God's Kingdom.

With the story of the gospel, we make several assumptions. There were three gifts; gold, frankincense and myrrh. The gospel does not tell us the number of the magi. We assume there were three, because of the number of gifts. We even have names for them, Casper, Melchior and Balthazar. They aren't named in the text. For the evangelist Matthew, this is a sign of the prophesy's fulfillment in Jesus. Is it? Our savior is not a baby; the Messiah had his earthly life entirely ahead of himself. Jesus was born not to be honored but rejected, beaten and hung on a tree to die. It is in Jesus' death that God's plan of salvation is fulfilled.

This story sets the stage for such reversal of expectation. God sacrifices God as an offering acceptable for our redemption. This helpless baby is the incarnate Word of God. From him will come the church and the promised Kingdom of God. Strip away the sentiment and what do we have? The hope of what is yet to become reality. A baby is God, Messiah and Redeemer? Not just yet. God will save us through the death of God? This reverses all common sense. A man will rise from the dead? An absurdity to Jews and a stumbling block to pagans. What is this to us in a world plagued by prejudice, pandemic, politics and violence?

It's not a baby that we seek. Nor do we relive the events of the scriptures. We live in a world that still needs, though it may not know it, the living presence of Jesus. Today's feast celebrates the way Jesus chose to let his presence be known to the pagan magi. An infant Messiah was as unlikely an epiphany as his epiphany to the world through us. Since we believe, how have we come to faith? Who or what has revealed God's presence to us? We believe because faith is a gift God gave us. I have always prayed the prayer of the father, in the gospel, who sought Jesus to heal his child. "What's needed is Faith!" Jesus proclaimed. The father responded with what I believe to be some of the most poignant and powerful words, "Lord, I believe; help my unbelief!"

God may work in mysterious ways. Those same ways can also be absurd and unlikely. What may be impossible for us in no way limits God. Only in God are all things possible. Creation, as unlikely as it is, has happened; but once. God became a human being; like us in all but sin. Each of us was born and has lived until this day. Salvation happened once and for all. The chances that any of these events has happened may be very slim. God, however, does not operate by chance, luck or happenstance. God, as infinite, eternal and unconditional, operates out of God's nature which is love.

The story of the Magi, their visit and gifts is a holy story. Jesus was there with his parents. His presence alone, as God's son, is holiness. Holiness is to know the presence of God. As we read or hear the story again, we remember that God is near, not in the story but to us now. God shines upon us whenever God is part of our thoughts. Epiphany is a holy event however we remember. Theophany happens more often than we realize and is only a thought or memory away.

May the Spirit work in, through and among us to reveal the living presence of God.

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