

Reading for Epiphany

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

Any time I sit down to prepare a homily, or now a reflection, based on the day's scripture lessons, I pray that the Holy Spirit will help me to find an insight into the meaning of God's Word. There is a prayer I pray before I proclaim the gospel at mass, "Lord, be in my heart and on my lips that I may worthily proclaim your gospel and preach your word." I also make the sign of the cross as a sign of my openness to the guidance of the Spirit. This is based upon the prayer that the priest prays over the deacon, who, when at mass, proclaims the gospel. Before I was ordained a priest, for I am still a deacon, I was always gratified to be blest before I opened my mouth to speak. God knows I need it. I adapted the prayer to invoke God's blessing because it is God's Good News that I preach and not mine.

Today is the Feast of the Epiphany of the Lord. What does epiphany mean? Our English word comes from Greek. The Greek word is epiphanes meaning "manifest or conspicuous," or from epiphainein meaning "to manifest, display, show off or come suddenly into view." It is based on the combination of two words, epi "on, to" and phainein "to show." For years I've used

manifest and manifestation to define its meaning. Epiphany shows that Jesus is our Messiah, Lord and Savior. The Three Kings follow the Star of Bethlehem to find the Baby Jesus to worship him and give him their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. Exactly how does that event show Jesus as the Son of God?

There is much legend surrounding this story, found only in the gospel of Matthew. The Magi have names, Balthazar, Melchior, and Casper. Their names do not come from the gospel. They were pagans and represented strange gods. So why is this event so auspicious? It fulfills the prophesy of Isaiah. Caravans shall fill you, the holy city of Jerusalem. They will bring camels, gold, frankincense and myrrh. Isaiah had prophesied the beginning of the Messianic Age. The Magi followed the light, sent by God, and found the Messiah.

Mathew's gospel was written for a Jewish, Christian Church. His purpose in writing the gospel was to reference the prophecies of the coming Messiah in scripture and show that they all point to Jesus. Messiah is a Hebrew word that means the Anointed One. The translation we use at mass for the Lectionary uses the word Christ. It is the Greek word for Messiah. All the prophetic references to the Messiah come from the Old Testament. The arrival of the pagan Magi symbolizes the fact that few Christians today have Jewish ancestry. Most of us descend from the pagan Gentiles who flocked to the Church seeking new life and salvation.

I was struck by two of the synonyms for epiphany, to show off and to suddenly come into view. When I pray the scriptures in preparation to preach, I ask God to show me what God wants me to see and that I catch a glimpse of what I can say. There is no doubt in my mind that I enjoy being the center of attention and delight in making sense as I preach. I'm human and to be a show off is always a temptation, but in preaching, my main intention is to make clearer and show God's word. Often my insights come from the message I need to hear. Like the Magi of the gospel's story, I seek Jesus. I have discovered that I can find him in reading and praying the Scriptures.

Insight into the Word's meaning and inspiration to find the right words are my daily Epiphany. What I then can offer is not a gift that originates in me but a gift I have first received as the fruit of prayer and reflection. God is the giver of that gift, not me. I may be the one who composes or writes the words; the words are my own, but it is my fervent belief and hope that the Word of God comes through my words.

There are days I have when insight comes hard and my words fall short, but after nearly forty three years of preaching more often it comes at first reading of scripture. I also rely on the reflection and insight of others. I have a few good sources of commentaries. I do not hesitate to glean what I can from the thoughts of others. God can speak in many ways and through many people.

The older I have gotten, the less I focus on the details of the bible stories and the more I focus on what the message means to me. How can God's word enrich my life? Who does God want me to become? If God wants all people to be saved, does God save the whole world at once or

one person at a time? In my heart, it is the latter. The process is in God's own time too. My expectations are not important. My faith and hope rest in my trust of God.

God invites each of us into a deeper relationship, through Jesus, with God and one another. God may be in heaven, but God works through you and me. Going on a pilgrimage to a holy place or shrine can be an enriching experience. The Magi did just that and found God in the Baby Jesus. Their journey took time and many miles. The holiest place and most intimate of shrines is within our own hearts. How do we receive God's invitation? How does God call us by name? What will God say to us?

There are two experiences we all have. Sometimes we can find ourselves thinking about God. God enters our thoughts suddenly and unbidden. In those moments God enters our lives for the Holy Spirit prays within us, as St. Paul said in his letter to the Romans. Jesus, in the gospel of John, entered the upper room and joined the disciples as they fished after the resurrection. Two disciples recognized Jesus in the breaking of the bread in the evening of Easter. Our unexpected thoughts of God are much the same.

The other experience is similar. Sometimes when we pray, whether it's the rosary, Liturgy of the Hours, at mass or, God help us, as I preach, we find ourselves miles away, thinking about something completely unbidden and unrelated to the prayer. The good sisters, of my youth, always called that day-dreaming. Those are blessed moments when the Holy Spirit raises up the very things about which God wants us to pray. These two experiences, when seen in this light, reveal how God enters our lives in a most intimate way, guiding our thoughts and leading us to where the Spirit wants us to go.

What does God say to us? What do we expect to hear? God is love. God's love is infinite, everlasting and unconditional. God revealed the extent of God's love with the birth of Jesus. God so loved the world that he sent his son to be our savior, so that all who believe may receive eternal life. We all believe and have received God's saving love. God has invited us by name and says, "I love you." This is the fruit of our journey to seek God; we discover God within ourselves.

This past year has brought us much; much of which we don't like. Pandemic, politics and prejudice have been forces that drive us and keep us apart. We have witnessed sorrow and suffering in the year's wake. Yet, God remained present in Jesus' sufferings and remains present through ours. We are all caught up in the wake's turbulence. Few people remain untouched by the consequences. Thereby, in a profound way, we are all in this together. We are bound by our shared experience of the year's catastrophes. There is another way too. In faith we can seek and then find God's hand that can lead us together. When we act for the common good, show compassion to others with whom we may disagree, be responsible in keeping others safe and try to be kind we reveal the hand of God that guides us. Jesus revealed God at the Epiphany. Every day this year has been an epiphany of God's grace that flows through us.

What God reveals, through Epiphany, is not in the story's special effects; not the Star nor the Three Kings. It is certainly not in the gifts they brought for the Baby Jesus. God made the gold and created the trees whose sap, when burned, releases the sweet smell of incense. (Incense has always made me sneeze.) It is about what God has offered us. God has given us the gifts of life, faith, family, friends and love. What God reveals through epiphany is God's heart, filled with compassion and mercy. If we take the time to reflect, seek, knock and open, we receive God's gift of Jesus.

May this New Year find you in good health. May the love of God continue to be revealed to a needy world through us.

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