

## The Epiphany of the Lord

January 3, 2016 11:30 a.m. St. Augustine Cathedral

These last 10 days have been very busy, and I hope you have enjoyed all the many liturgical and holiday activities with your family and loved ones as we've celebrated Christmas, New Years, and watched lots of College Football Bowl games, at least 2 of which made many of us quite happy, and one of which---not so much!

For most of the world, Christmas is over. But, here in our "Church Life," that's not the case. We're still celebrating Christmas. In fact, with today's Feast of Epiphany, we expand the significance of Christmas from an event important only to Israel and the Jewish community, to an event with universal meaning.

On this very special Feast of Epiphany, all of today's Scripture Readings call us to rejoice, and for good reason. We heard the Prophet Isaiah in our First Reading shouting: *"Rise up in splendor, Jerusalem! Your Light has come; the glory of the Lord shines upon you!"* Our voices

joined together in our Psalm Response with that glorious message:

*“Lord, every nation on earth will adore you!”* And St. Paul continues

that theme in our 2<sup>nd</sup> Reading by talking about *“the*

*mystery....now...revealed: that the Gentiles are co-heirs, members of the*

*same Body, and co-partners (with the Jews) in the promise in Christ*

*Jesus....”*

So, yes, we continue to celebrate Christmas today, and we will continue celebrating the Christmas season until we conclude it next Sunday with the celebration of the Feast of the Baptism of the Lord, and the beginning of Jesus’ public ministry.

A beautiful and unique part of the Liturgy of the Word for today’s Feast is the Announcement of all the Major Feasts that will take place in this New Year, which Dr. Fielding proclaimed right after the Gospel. If you listened closely, you will have noticed that all the dates focus on the great Feast of Easter, which this year comes very early on March 27<sup>th</sup> ---less than three months from today; and of course that means

Ash Wednesday and Lent begins very early as well, even before Valentine's Day, on February 10<sup>th</sup> --- in just about six weeks!

Christmas is very important because Jesus was born into our world--- God became One with us. Epiphany is also important because we celebrate the fact that Jesus came into our world to be the Savior of all the world. But, the most important reason why Jesus came into the world was for everything that Easter represents, because it was through that event that Jesus reconciled and saved the world through His suffering, death and resurrection!

That was God's plan all along---ever since Original Sin brought about a rupture in the relationship between God and us---His beloved Creation. God knew that it would take everything He had to heal that rupture, and that's why, "*in the fullness of time*", God sent His Son into the world to be His Word made Flesh, so that after He was born, and after He grew up, and after He lived His life and showed us how to live our lives, and after He began to form His Church gathered around Peter

and the other 12 Apostles----then He would be ready to save the world by conquering sin and the power of death which restored the relationship between us and God because of His Great Mercy.

Christmas made God's plan possible and Epiphany began to make His plan universal. But Easter made God's plan invincible! That's why we should really "enjoy" this part of the Christmas message today, as we reflect on the coming of those non-believing strangers from the Far East. We heard St. Matthew describe them as Magi; tradition tells us there were three, but there could have been more, or less; tradition also sometimes calls them kings, or astrologers, or Wise Men who came "bearing gifts, and traversed afar, (over) field and fountain, moor and mountain, following yonder Star!" And after all that traveling and searching and following, and even after they wisely dealt with Herod's attempt to manipulate their search to serve his own mad desires to kill the one he considered to be his competitor for the power of the Throne, the star led them to a house in Bethlehem. Matthew tells us

that when they entered the house, *“they saw the Child with Mary His Mother”* even though they were non-believers, they somehow instinctively “knew” Who this Child was, because St. Matthew told us that: *“They prostrated themselves and did him homage.”* And then they gave him gifts. Not just something extra or left over from their journey, but the most precious gifts they could imagine: one gave the Child gold---a symbol of the Child’s Kingship; one gave the Child frankincense---a symbol of the Child’s Divinity; and one gave the Child myrrh---a symbol of the Child’s humanity and his mortality.

Dear Friends, what about us? What do we choose to give Jesus as we find ourselves three days into this new year? Even when we take down our Christmas decorations and put everything away for another year, we need to remember that in this New Year, we’re beginning another chapter in our own pilgrimage of faith. What can we learn from these Wise Men---these seekers of the Truth---to help us make this New Year happy and blessed?

I'm sure we don't have gold, frankincense or myrrh to offer the Child Jesus; I'm also sure that's not what the Christ Child would even want from us. What I'm pretty sure this Child, Who is our Savior, wants from us is the one thing that is uniquely ours to give----and that is our free will.

Every time we freely choose to give Jesus our heart---every time we freely choose to give Him the right choices we make in favor of living a virtuous life rather than a sinful one----every time we freely choose to show mercy to those who have offended us, or to be just in our dealings with our neighbor, or to be truly charitable and loving in the ways we reach out to those in need, we are giving Jesus a greater treasure than these fine gifts of gold, frankincense or myrrh.

When we choose to live lives of joyful and courageous faith, and submit ourselves to follow God's will in our daily lives, we give him all that matters to Him.

As you know, less than a month ago, on December 8<sup>th</sup>, Pope Francis inaugurated a Jubilee Year of Mercy, and marked that occasion by opening a Holy Door of Mercy in Rome. Our Holy Father directed that every Diocese should also designate a Holy Door of Mercy, and on December 13, we opened the Holy Door of Mercy for our Diocese here in our own Cathedral, the far door on the left side of the main entrance to our Cathedral.

Pope Francis asks us to see the Holy Door as a spiritual metaphor for how our God wants to give us His mercy and love every time we pass through the Door to come to Him.

Everything Jesus said and did in His public ministry----every parable that He told, every miracle that He worked---were demonstrations of God's love and mercy that He desperately wants us all to experience.

So perhaps, the very best gift we can give to Jesus, the Christ Child, the Savior of the World, is for us to live this Year of 2016, and this Jubilee Year of Mercy, with open doors, open hearts, open arms, and an

open spirit to live our lives as much like Jesus as we possibly can, and in turn, to strengthen the relationship between us and God which Jesus came to restore.

One of my favorite Old Testament Prophets is Micah. He posed that same question one time in his writings as he asked: *“With what gift shall I come before the Lord?....Shall I come with holocausts, ....with thousands of rams....? Shall I give my firstborn?”*

That was precisely the incredible gift that God gave to us and all the world---the gift of His firstborn and only-begotten Son to be our salvation. But all God wants in return is the same answer that He gave to Micah in response to his question: *“You have been told, O man, what is good and what the Lord requires of you: only to do right, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God.” (Micah 6:8)*

We will soon put the Christmas tree and other decorations away, but what Christmas means should never be put away----Christmas makes all

the difference in the world, and it remains the greatest Good News in the history of humanity.

If we can give this dear Christ Child, Who is our Savior and the Savior of all the World, that precious gift of doing what's right, of being loving and merciful, and walking humbly through life with God, this will be a truly Happy and Blessed New Year!

God bless you, now and always!