

The Epiphany of the Lord

January 8, 2017 11:30 a.m. St. Augustine Cathedral

While for many people Christmas has been over since last week's celebration of New Years, and, if it hasn't happened already, today will probably be the day for most people that the Christmas decorations will be taken down and put away until next year, here in Church, the Christmas Event reaches a kind of "high point" today with the Celebration of the Feast of Epiphany.

"Epiphany" is a Greek word meaning "manifestation". We celebrated Jesus' Birth two weeks ago today, but the only ones to really know about the event on that first Christmas night were the shepherds keeping their night watch over their flocks who heard the Angel make the announcement: "*I proclaim to you good news of great joy---today in the City of David, a Child has been born Who is both Christ and Lord*", and then they saw an entire Heavenly Choir singing: "*Glory to God in the Highest, and peace on earth to those on whom God's favor rests*".

They went, saw the Child lying in the manger, and then returned to their flocks, and continued to be Shepherds; but they clearly were forever changed by that experience, as they glorified and praised God for Who that Child is.

Today's Feast of the Epiphany celebrates how Jesus began to be "manifest"----or made known----to the rest of the world. The story of the Three Kings is near and dear to our hearts, and it's an essential and treasured part of the Christmas story. The only thing we know about those individuals is what we heard in this Gospel passage from St. Matthew----they traveled to Bethlehem from some distant place in the Far East on their camels, and with their precious treasures for the new-born King----and they traveled back home after seeing the Child and doing Him homage, never to be heard from again. But what they stand for, and who they represent, is an essential part of the Christmas Mystery that we really need to pay attention to.

These travelers from the Far East bear different titles: Magi, Wise Men, Astrologers, and perhaps the most common, the Three Kings. We know nothing about them of any substance; tradition has given them the names of Caspar, Melchior and Balthasar; and our imagination can provide a lot more details to fill in the gaps. But we **do** know that these persons must have been 1) intelligent: they studied the stars---primitive astronomers; 2) they were people of some means and wealth: to put together a caravan and travel a great distance and to be able to be gone from home for quite a length of time----that was a huge investment of time and money; and

finally, we know 3) that they were people of great courage: keeping in mind that there were no paved roads, and no security cameras, and they were passing through various countries and lots of dangers----they had to be brave and willing to put up with, and find ways to overcome, whatever problems they encountered along the way.

What is most appealing to me about them, whether their title is King, Magi, or Wise Person, is that they were "Seekers". They saw a Star----they knew it meant something significant----they deduced in their own analysis that it meant that a new King was coming to power who perhaps might bring to light a solution for all the world's problems----And they were determined to follow wherever the Star would lead them; they were determined to seek after whatever truth would be revealed. Never did they imagine in their wildest dreams that this Star would lead them to Truth itself in Jesus, the Son of God.

The true greatness of these three mysterious figures who are so much a part of the Christmas Mystery is their desire to follow the star and to seek the truth.

Those are the qualities that each of us, as followers of Jesus, should have. It's obvious that our culture is making every effort to squeeze God out of existence in our world. And all too often, the social pressures of our world try, directly or indirectly, to force us to "fit in" with everyone else---to be in "lockstep" with what everyone else thinks or does so that we're not "left out", left behind, or worst of all, be "unfriended" in the world of Facebook. That kind of lifestyle leads us away from God and His Truth. It leads us further into a life of indifference and spiritual boredom.

We don't have the title of Magi, Kings, Wise Persons, or Astrologers----We have much better and infinitely more important titles: we are Christians, and more specifically, Catholics; we are followers of Jesus, the Savior of the World; we are disciples of Christ, Who *is* the Way, the Truth, and the Life; we are members of the Body of Christ-----we-----all of us here-----are living, vibrant, active parts of Christ Himself, with Jesus Christ as the Head of this Body. We are people who should still be following wherever that Star, who is the Holy Spirit, leads us. We are "seekers" of the Truth; we are people who live by the ideals that have been laid out by Jesus in the Beatitudes and in the Gospel of Life. We are people who ask the questions about what is right and just and true, not what is lucrative, expedient, and self-serving. We need to be people who are always seeking God and choosing to live according to God's ways in our lives.

When these mysterious Epiphany figures outwitted the deranged King Herod and came to where the Star stood still over the house where the Holy Family was, and when they saw the Child with His mother, St. Matthew tells us that “*they prostrated themselves and did Him homage!*” Before they did anything else---before they gave Him their precious gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh---they gave Him themselves---they gave Him their hearts.

Tomorrow, the Church celebrates the Feast of the Baptism of Jesus, and this brief Christmas/Epiphany season comes to a close. We too will take down our Christmas manger and the other Christmas decorations here at the Cathedral and put them away for another year. But the Mystery and the Joy of Christmas goes on all year. God has come among us---God has come to be One with Us---in Jesus.

St. Paul tells us today that this “*mystery*” has been revealed to the world. Jesus has come to be Christ and Lord not just for the Jewish people, but for the Gentiles---that is all the rest of the people in the world. As Paul said: “*The Gentiles are co-heirs, members of the same body, and co-partners in the promise in Christ Jesus through the Gospel.*” Jesus has come for ALL people---for the whole world. He didn’t do that just by being born, however; He did that only by growing up, as each of us has or is doing, by beginning His public ministry of teaching the Good News of God’s Love for all people, and by remaining faithful to His mission and enduring suffering, death and resurrection whereby Jesus accomplished the mission of saving the world---saving each of us---from the power of sin and the lasting effects of death.

That’s why on the Feast of Epiphany each year we traditionally announce the Proclamation of all the movable major Feasts of this new Year as they all relate to Easter, which this year is relatively late, not until Sunday, April 16th. While Christmas is certainly an important Feast, the most important of all is Easter. Jesus was born in a manger on Christmas, knowing that one day He would die on a Cross on Good Friday, and three days later, rise from the Dead on Easter, for the salvation of the world.

Before we put the external aspects of Christmas away for another year, let today be an opportunity for each of us to think about these Wise Men, these Magi, These Kings, these “Seekers after the Truth” who, after months of travel, found a Child with His Mother, and somehow, though not what they expected, knew that this Child was Who they had been looking for all their lives and prostrated themselves in homage. The only One before Whom we would, or even should, prostrate ourselves, is before God. These “Seekers” found God after Whom they had been seeking all their lives.

My sisters and brothers in Christ, we find God every time we come to Mass. We are in God's Presence every time we hear God's life-giving Word. We receive God Himself every time we come forward to receive Holy Communion. We don't have to "travel over field and fountain, moor and mountain". Our God is here with us, and even within us. We---make up His Body. We----are His Church. Let us never take that for granted. Let us give our God Homage in the ways we keep His Name holy, and in the ways we treat all other people with the respect every human being, made in God's image and likeness, deserves; in the ways we choose to live our lives according to His ways.

Even though the Christmas season is coming to an end, Christmas is never over. Christmas means that we should always be "seeking" after God and God's ways in our lives. Christmas means that we should prostrate ourselves in God's Presence among us give God the homage He deserves every day of our lives, and treat all people with a God-ly respect and dignity. Christmas means that our God has come to be with us, to save us, to guide us, and to never, ever leave us alone.

Merry Christmas---all year long!

Faithfully yours in Christ, + Bishop Paul J. Bradley