

Epiphanies of Our Lord

...On entering the house they saw the child with Mary his mother. They prostrated themselves and did him homage. (Matthew 2:11)

Today we celebrate the second of four great *epiphanies* of our Lord in human history. The word “epiphany” comes from two Greek words that mean “revelation” or “manifestation.” According to the Church’s liturgical calendar, today is *the* Epiphany of our Lord, but the term could be applied equally well to each of the other three.

The *first* great epiphany, of course, occurs at Christmas, when God reveals himself to us in the form of an infant, born homeless and in poverty surrounded by first century Judea’s poor and outcast, symbolized by shepherds.

In today’s solemnity, the *second* great epiphany, recounted only in the gospel of **Matthew**, we see the same new born baby but the circumstances of his birth are hardly mentioned. The emphasis is different. According to tradition, three foreign dignitaries come to pay homage to the infant *king*. In the early church they were seen as representatives of people from the known continents of the world; Melchior from Africa; Balthazar from Asia; and Gaspar from Europe, signifying the universal character of God’s saving grace.

The *third* great epiphany, the baptism of Jesus, we celebrate next Sunday. Now an adult, we find Jesus is in the Jordan River with John the Baptist as the heavens open, the Spirit descends like a dove and God solemnly intones: “*You are my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.*”

The *fourth* great epiphany occurs at the wedding banquet in Cana, recounted only in **John**’s gospel, which we will commemorate two weeks from today, on January 17th.

At the wedding celebration in Cana, water (symbolizing the Old Covenant) is changed into new wine (symbolizing the New Covenant.) Mary (representing the “People of God”) is the *intermediary* at whose request Jesus brings about the change. In **John’s** gospel, it’s the first of seven “signs” by which Jesus reveals his identity as Lord.

During our trip to the Holy Land last April, Gloria and I visited the point where the Jordan River flows into the Sea of Galilee at the site Jesus is said to have been baptized. In Bethlehem we visited the Church of the Nativity, originally built in 325 C.E. over the cave where, according to tradition, Jesus was born. As you can imagine, experiencing the sites, where three of the four great epiphanies are believed to have taken place, was quite a thrill. And, as you can also imagine, with the memory of those sites freshly in mind, preaching this homily takes on special meaning for me this year!

In Eastern Orthodox tradition the arrival of the magi or wise men or three kings is celebrated on January 6th with great festivity. Since ancient times Eastern Catholics have celebrated both Christ’s birth and the magi’s arrival on that same day, with greater emphasis accorded to his baptism than his birth.

An important lesson of today’s readings is that there are no *outsiders* in God’s kingdom. All of us are, indeed, created equal. Regardless of physical, cultural or other differences we’re all brothers and sisters of the same human family with God as Father. Consequently, then as now, there’s no room in the kingdom for hatred based on nationality, ethnicity, race, tribe, religion, class or occupation. How sad and ironic then that the Holy Land, birthplace of the Prince of Peace, continues to be a hotbed of sectarian and secular discord.

In preparing this homily, I came across a story with a novel twist. It portrays the

three foreign visitors at different stages of life -- Gaspar as a young man; Balthazar a middle aged man; and Melchior an elderly man. *Following the star, the three arrive together at the cave where the Prince of Peace is born, but each enters separately. Melchior, as the eldest, goes in first. He finds an old man like himself inside. They share stories and speak of memory and gratitude. Middle aged Balthazar enters next, but also encounters a man of his own age. They speak passionately about leadership and responsibility. The youthful Gaspar enters last and finds a young prophet. They discuss reform and justice. Afterward when the three foreigners talk among themselves, they are understandably confused over the discrepancies of their stories. They then together take their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh into the cave. And find -- a twelve day old baby.*

What's the meaning of the story? Jesus reveals himself to all people, at all stages of life, in all places and times, whether Jew or Gentile. Most of us picture Jesus as portrayed by Western European artists – blond or brown hair, blue eyes, with fair complexion. That's OK, but we need to remember that Jesus was a Middle Eastern Jew who lived in a tropical climate and, therefore, more probably resembled Anwar Sadat of Egypt than John Paul II of Poland. If you travel to Peru, for example, you will discover Jesus portrayed as Incan; as Asian in Japan; as African in Kenya. Our Savior, in other words, belongs to no one group of people exclusively.

Jesus reveals himself to each of us, so that each of us, in turn, can reveal him to others. That's a core teaching of our faith. In Isaiah's poetic vision of the first reading, the dark and gloom the Israelites are experiencing in exile gives way to wondrous light and glory – an epiphany of our Lord.

A young World War I officer had been fatally wounded. As he lay dying in a trench at Verdun, he was in great pain but kept thinking of the unborn child his wife was carrying. The last thing he said before he died was, "Well, at least I know that if it's a boy, he won't have to go through this." Back in 1914 there was a lot of talk about the "Great War" being the war to end all wars. Many of those who died felt very deeply that their sacrifice was making it possible for their children never to have to go to war again. But, as we well know, their children did: in World War II; the Korean War; the Vietnam War; the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars.

Noble Laureate and Holocaust survivor, Elie Wiesel has said: *"Humanity must remember that peace is not God's gift to his creatures; peace is our gift to each other."* Peace won't happen, however, unless we make it happen and it can't happen until we secure justice for the *least* of our brothers and sisters. Is that a tall order? You betcha! But that's precisely what God expects His people everywhere to do.

In short, you and I are called to *enlighten* our little corner of the world. To be for each other -- *Epiphanies of our Lord*.

Anthony J. Sciolino

Isaiah 60:1-6/20; Ephesians 3:2-3a, 5-6; Matthew 2:1-12.

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