

Epiphany - B
Isaiah 60:1-6;
Ephesians 3:2-3a, 5-6;
Matthew 2:1-12
Little Flower - 1/3/21

My Brothers and Sisters,

The word *epiphany* comes from the Greek word *ἐπιφάνεια*, which means *manifestation*. Today we celebrate Jesus' manifestation to the Gentiles, the peoples of the world, represented by the magi in the Gospel. To understand the significance of the Epiphany, we have to understand it in relation to Christmas. Although we sometimes refer to Epiphany as Little Christmas, in the early Church, Epiphany was a more important feast than Christmas. Christmas celebrates the fact of Jesus' birth. Epiphany celebrates the meaning of his birth.

As much as we have to understand Christmas and Epiphany in relation to each other, there is also a marked contrast between them. From a Jewish perspective at the time of Jesus, there were only two groups of people, Jews who were saved and non-Jews or Gentiles who were not saved. On Christmas, Jesus was manifested to Jewish shepherds. At the Epiphany, Jesus was manifested to the magi, who were Gentiles. The shepherds and the magi not only represented religious differences. Their worlds, their culture, their lifestyles were completely different. The shepherds were probably poor, uneducated, and very rough. The magi were probably wealthy, educated, and very polished. Religious differences meant more to the people of Jesus' time; socio-economic differences mean more to us.

To understand the story of the magi, we have to read it in light of today's readings from Isaiah and from Paul's Letter to the Ephesians. Both readings suggest that Jesus came not only to reconcile us with God but also with one another. From Paul's perspective, the great mystery, the great revelation, was "*that the Gentiles are coheirs, members of the same body, and copartners in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.*" Although the focus is on faith and salvation, they suggest that our unity or oneness with others, especially those unlike us, needs to extend beyond faith, religion, and the walls of the church.

The magi presented Jesus with gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Some have suggested that frankincense symbolizes the high priesthood of Jesus. As priest, Jesus was a healer, reconciler, and peacemaker. Therefore, we are called to be healers, reconcilers, and peacemakers. In the midst of larger divisions within church and society we need to work very hard to be instruments of peace rather than division. This has to start within our own families and communities. We know how messy, complex, and divided families often are. We need to work very hard to be bridge builders in our families and communities.

A second theme today is light. Isaiah prophesied, "*Rise up in splendor, Jerusalem! Your light has come, the glory of the Lord shines upon you.*" A bright star led the magi to Jesus, the light of the world. Although Jesus said, "*I am the light of the world.*" [Jn. 8:12], he also said, "*You are the light of the world...your light must shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your heavenly Father*" [Mt. 5:14 & 16]. It is through our good deeds that we are the light of the world. Therefore, we are called to make our own and live the values Jesus lived. If we do this, we bring his light to our world today.

My brothers and sisters, the Gospel tells us that the magi from the east followed the newly risen star to find the child Jesus. Notwithstanding their probable wealth, education, and refinement, their journey had to have been long and arduous. Ultimately it was a search for meaning and a search for faith. Although Christ is present within and among us, our search for meaning ultimately is our faith journey to find Christ. Are we willing to make the sacrifices necessary for the journey? The paradox is that after the magi make the journey and find the Christ child whom they were seeking, they return to their own country by a different route. Whenever we find Christ, our life takes a new direction as we return home to share Christ with others.