

EPIPHANY OF THE LORD JANUARY 6, 2019

The story of the first Epiphany in Matthew's gospel has amassed many customs and folklore traditions. The images of three Kings visiting the infant Jesus have become impressed on us from numerous works of art. The opera, "Amahl and the Night Visitors," has become a favorite of mine. In many old countries of Europe, this is the day that gifts are exchanged rather than on Christmas Day. Yesterday in New York's Harlem there was a three kings pageant in the streets. I wonder if some of these customs never took root in Puritan New England. After all, Christmas itself had been banned in Boston.

In some monasteries the custom perdures, which we had in my monastery in earlier years. On Epiphany three monks go around all of the monastery with holy water and incense blessing all rooms – and I mean all rooms, including the cow barn, the chicken coup, the pig styes, the green house, the bathrooms. As they bless the room, one of the three monks writes in chalk on the top of a door, 20 C+M+B 19.

The three letters stand for the traditional names of the kings, Caspar, Melchior and Balthasar. The 20 and 19 at the beginning and end represent the year. However some monks would tell new-comers and guests that the words stand for an order for the delivery of beer: 20 cases of monastery beer at \$19.00 a case. I suggest this is a good example of the Catholic Imagination.

Now, if we want to be historically accurate, we really don't know the names of these visitors from the east. Nor do we know how many of them there were. And the scriptures do not identify them as kings. So the hymn that begins "We three kings of Orient are..." is fake news.

But, hear me out. If this story lacks some historical facts, this does not mean we are denying the truth. The truth is to be found within the story and within poetry. In the midst of the story is the fact of the birth of Jesus, Bethlehem situates him as being a member of the House of David, a very important Messianic identification. And then Herod was very much real. He was a petty tyrant. This helps us to know the time of the birth of Christ. We know that Herod died around the year 4 B.C. When they stabilized the calendar some years later, Jesus' birth was miscalculated.

Beyond history and facts, there are real theological meanings to this story. The Astrologers come from the East. This indicates that they were gentiles. The birth

of Jesus is not to be the exclusive property of any one people, any one religion. The reading from Isaiah corroborates that Emmanuel is still waiting to be discovered in what we think are the most unlikely places and by the most unlikely people. There are serious seekers, contemporary Magi, all around us. Young people, women, former Catholics have been turned off by an exclusive church and are spiritually hungry. We must recognize sincere seekers in our midst.

A second spiritual lesson found in this story is that God's presence can be found through creation. One of the reasons contemporary people do not find God readily is that they are not in touch with the forces of nature. We have established ourselves as over or superior to creation. If we are not in harmony with nature, we are in harmony with our Creator.

And the epiphany story holds forth a very important aspect of our relation to nature. The wise ones from the east had to proceed in darkness. They would not have seen the star if they were immersed in light. There is a necessary balance of light and darkness in our human lives, just as there is a necessary balance of sound and silence in our lives. We complain a lot about these winter months – cold and darkness. Could we perhaps see an invitation to quiet down and appreciate the darkness and quiet? It is a great time for study and reading as well as for prayer and meditation.

These readings of the feast of the Epiphany invite us to begin this new year by asking with whom in today's gospel we decide to identify. Will we, like the temple priests opt to protect the status quo, choose conformity and obedience to power, to decide to settle for a sedentary church that remains silent in the face of darkness, contented with the minimal ritual and almsgiving that supposedly fulfill our religious obligations? Or do we want to be more like the Magi, people anxious to seek and keep moving in search of God among us? Matthew holds up the example of the Magi to nudge us out of our cozy corners into areas where we can encounter Emmanuel, God-with-us, in ever new ways. Will we follow our star?

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