

EPIPHANY OF THE LORD: JANUARY 8, 2023

Matthew, the author of the first gospel in the New Testament, often strikes me as a great storyteller. Nowhere is this more evident than in his story of the Magi. There are many levels to it and many audiences who could find meaning in it. It is a great story for children if you don't include the massacre of the babies. The heroes show much courage and confidence in their determination to seek the child. Long journeys, guiding stars, ominous danger, holy dreams, great escapes, and a threatened baby. Light fights night. The joy of discovery ends long wandering. Truth foils deception.

The Magi symbolize our noblest human efforts. They are the wise ones, stargazers, people of philosophy, science and treasure. And, unlike most men, they don't hesitate to stop and ask for directions.

The story is also an archetype of the human, spiritual journey, the pilgrimage of life to which we are all summoned. The Magi's journey helps us to understand our own journey to find meaning and purpose in our lives. First of all they must have known they were looking for more in life. They didn't settle for affluence, position, respect, comfort. They were alert and awake to what life is really about, that we desire and seek something beyond us. Maybe they weren't thinking explicitly of God but they felt there was something more than they could name. They were attracted by the power of a divine eros. Totally beyond human understanding, this power is known through God's energies and activities. We know there is something more worth pursuing. The Magi, and we too, feel a growing desire and so they studied, read, examined the past. Like them, when we discover beauty, goodness, truth, we are uncovering deeper life.

The Magi's next step was to follow their longing and their desire, and they accepted a longing that can never be satisfied. Saint Gregory of Nyssa, fourth century mystic, said that we are half-hearted creatures who fool around with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us. Our path usually leads to a holy dissatisfaction and we can never get enough. We follow the star and take the journey that will never end. The danger is to settle down for less in our lives and think we have accomplished the journey of life.

We have no idea of what the Magi did after leaving Bethlehem except to take another way home. Committing to a life of journey requires the discipline of a

journey. We are not tourists in life but pilgrims. Gregory identifies three stages in the progress we make on our journey into God. We first enter a desert where our senses are put on alert and we pay attention. Have you faced a desert in your lives? Recently I came to the realization that I should stop my fight and discontent with winter, its cold, its emptiness. Perhaps the winter is my desert. I have much to learn from stillness and emptiness.

The second stage on the journey is to climb the mountain, moving beyond the senses and becoming more of a contemplative in prayer. One discerns now what one most desires in one's heart. And this is not a way of escape. The illumined heart is a heart full of compassion, more concerned with the needs of others.

Having climbed the mountain one comes to the third stage, entering the cloud where a person is one with God and surrenders in love to the one that one has been unknowingly desiring. To arrive there is to find the real meaning of our lives which will not be a static arrival but an ever-ending entry into the heart of God.

I don't understand all of this and I am sure you do not follow it all. But I am convinced there is a lot more to my life than I ever imagined. God is inaccessible and yet I long for God. My longing, my yearning, my desire, calls me to stay on this journey. The Magi risked all and can be a good image of what life's journey is all about.

The Magi knew that growth requires displacement, the uncomfortable process of venturing into an unknown that stretches and questions assumptions, all for the sake of a greater depth of being. In sum, the Magi had more faith in God than their own ideas and understanding. They were willing to sing, "I spent a lifetime looking for you" for the rest of their lives.

The feast of the epiphany invites us to a quiet disquiet, a way of living that has nothing to do with grumbling and complaint. We can nurture this disquiet though wonder, gratitude and hope, all of which require humility.

Buen camino, Buon viaggio, Bon voyage, have a good journey.

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