

The Solemnity of the Epiphany: Celebrating the One Body of Christ



The great British educator, Sir Ken Robinson, tells the story of three little boys, five and six year olds, who played the role of the three King's at their Kindergarten Nativity Play. They came marching in before the manger with paper hats and each carrying on box. The first boy laid his box before the baby Jesus and announced, "I have brought you gold." The second laid his box down and announced, "I have brought you myrrh." Now the third boy came down with sudden stage fright, but he plowed through it, remembered he had to put his box down but forgot his line. So he announced, "Frank sent this."

There are very many Epiphany stories revolving around the three Kings and their mission to seek, worship and give gifts to the King of Kings. I enjoy telling Henry Van Dyke's story about the Fourth Wise Man, O Henry's, The Gift of the Magi, and G. K. Chesterton's story about the Modern Wise Men

These and many other Epiphany stories are wonderful, but they concern mostly the gift aspect of the Matthew 2. There is message that is fundamental to the Epiphany that we might not reflect on as thoroughly as we should. We hear this message in today's second reading. The message is a message of mystery. St. Paul speaks about a great mystery that has been revealed. The mystery is simply this: "the Gentiles are coheirs with the Jews, members of the same body, and copartners of the promise of Christ in the gospel." The wise men came from the East. They were pagan astrologers called to the manger, called to faith. Their journey is our journey, the journey of people throughout the world and throughout history being called to the manger, being called to faith. The Epiphany is the celebration of our being included in the Mystery of Jesus Christ; not just included, more than included. It is the celebration of our being equal to the very people chosen to be the physical ancestors of the human nature of our Lord.

This was certainly difficult for the Jewish people of the first century to understand. They normally referred to those who were not Jews, the Gentiles, as dogs. It was mind boggling for them to think that God would consider the Gentiles their equals. The Jews were the chosen people. Would God include others in His Plan for their salvation? Yes, the Epiphany tells us, this was always God's plan. He never intended to be the God for only one portion of mankind. Even more, all people would be co-heirs of the Grace of Christ.

It was difficult for Jewish Christians to buy into the message of the Epiphany. It is also difficult for many of us.

We tend to see life through our own limited frames of reference. For example, when someone asks us for directions on going from one place to another, we tend to consider how we get to that place from our own homes. So, the priests who spend most of their ministry in South Pinellas were surprised to hear me tell them that it only takes 20-25 minutes for us up here in North Pinellas to drive to the Bethany Retreat Center in Lutz. From their frame of reference, they think that we have to go down to the Courtney Campbell or Howard Franklin causeways, go to Tampa, and then take the Suncoast Parkway up to Lutz.

When we envision the birth of the Lord, we tend to see him in the viewpoint of our own frame of reference. Therefore, most of the pictures of Mary and Jesus are of a fair skinned girl and a bouncing, blue eyed baby. But Jesus and Mary were not Europeans, not even Italian, as hard as that is to believe. And even though Jesus was 33, single and living with his mother, he was not Irish. Mary and Jesus were Semitic, people of that area of the world where the three races merge. I often think that God placed the Chosen people there as a message that all the people he created were to be the Chosen people.

Sadly, this is a message that is still secret. There is a certain arrogance that many Catholics have that is evident when they look down on people who are not from their culture. The Epiphany tells us that African Catholics are as Catholic as Asian Catholics and all Catholics. It also tells our brothers and sisters across the ocean that American Catholics are as Catholic as European Catholics.

We Catholics do not have the right to assume a spiritual superiority over any members of our faith whose background may be different than ours, or whose history in the Church might be shorter than ours. I am very pleased with the way that the members of the parish receive those who come into the faith on Easter. You understand that once a person has professed the faith, that person is an equal in the faith. We need to apply this same way of thinking to those from different continents. We have to

recognize that whether the faith is relatively new to an area, or has been there for over fifteen hundred years, we are all one body, equal before the Lord.

St. Paul says that this was a secret hidden for all ages, this coming of the Lord for everyone. It is up to us to reveal the secret. We do this by treating others with respect, particularly those who are different from us in externals, but the same as us in what matters, their union with Jesus Christ.

The word Epiphany means a showing or manifestation of the Lord. He was first shown to the wise men, astrologers whose faith guided them to Bethlehem. We need to show Him to all people seeking the spiritual body where they can be one with God.

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