

Commentary on the Gospel for Sun, Jan 4th 2015

The gospel reading of today's Feast of the Epiphany draws our attention to those exotic figures found on the edge of manger scenes, the Three Wise Men or Magi. They are typically portrayed, along with their camels, as draped in bright, rich garments—a detail that stands out all the more in a scene otherwise marked by poverty and simplicity. As do the extravagant gifts they bring: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. There is certainly much to gain by dwelling prayerfully on the imagery set forth in the gospel. The Magi's humble posture, their homage before the newborn King, and their generous outpouring of gifts in response to this revelation of God's love are held up for our contemplation and imitation.

But, I wonder, what about their journey to Bethlehem? And what followed upon their encounter with the infant Jesus? I suggest that we also reflect on T.S. Eliot's poem, "Journey of the Magi," which proposes an Ignatian-like contemplation on the journey as told by one of the three Wise Men. The lengthy first stanza dispels any romantic notions about the trip. Weather conditions were severe—"A cold coming we had of it/ Just the worst time of the year/ For a journey . . . The very dead of winter." Travel assistance was unreliable and accommodations were rough, to put things mildly—"The camel men cursing and grumbling/ And running away" and "the villages dirty and charging high prices." Little wonder that the narrator confesses there were times when they regretted the decision and wondered whether "this was all folly."

The next two stanzas, however, make clear that the journey made all the difference, that it was life-transforming although it occurred "a long time ago." Eliot employs understatement to describe the moment the Magi arrived at the place: "it was (you may say) satisfactory." But the beauty and the challenge of the poem are found in the final lines, where the narrator reflects on the mystery of Jesus' birth: "this Birth was/ Hard and bitter agony for us, like/ Death, our death." Following their encounter with the One to whom they were led, the Magi returned home "no longer at ease" with the former ways, with "an alien people clutching their gods." The last line—"I should be glad of another death"—refers, in actuality, to the new life we are offered by God, the life that is possible because of the Word made Flesh.

Epiphany maintains the theme of God's gift while also pointing us towards mission. The scene in Bethlehem continues to remind us that the Incarnation reveals the extent of God's love for us. God holds nothing back, not even God's only Son, in reaching out in order to enter into intimate relationship with us. We do well to contemplate the nativity scene, not only during the Christmas season but throughout the year. That requires discipline and commitment as we return to the routine of our daily lives after the holiday season. The drudgery of the long winter months, the demands on our time and energy by family and work, and various problems around us can make what we celebrate at Christmas quickly fade into a dream or fantasy. Indeed, there is much in our culture that would name it "folly." The Magi show us the determination needed to contemplate God's gift manifested in the birth

of Jesus.

The feast today also hints at mission. The word Epiphany means “manifestation” and is associated with light shining in the darkness. The light Jesus brought into the world is a fire that ignites and empowers us to continue to bring God’s light into the world. This is the light of the “justice that flowers,” the justice that raises up the “the lowly and the poor” (responsorial psalm). This is the light that reveals the “mystery” of God’s desire and plan to bring all peoples into the one family of God (second reading). To be light for others means, like it did for the Magi, to “die” to the ways of darkness. It means to say No to the various idols around us. It means to be courageous in the face the Herods of today, the forces of violence and hatred and darkness that resist the light.

So come, let us (continue to) adore the Child; and come, let us receive the fire of God’s love and do our part to make every day an epiphany to those around us.

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