

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

The great British educator, Sir Ken Robinson, tells the story of three little boys, six year olds, who played the role of the three King's at their First Grade 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; no, not just included, more than included. The Epiphany 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.

When we envision the birth of the Lord, we tend to see him in the viewpoint of our own frame of reference. Most of the pictures of Mary and Jesus are from European painters. Mary is often a fair skinned girl with 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 for many the message of the Epiphany 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 European Catholics and all Catholics. The Epiphany also tells our brothers and sisters across the ocean that American Catholics are as Catholic as any other Catholics. A while back, I had a difficult experience with a group of priests from Spain who, I learned, questioned the faith of American Catholics. They had asked me to contribute homilies written in a very precise manner, which I later learned were to be used to help restore Catholicism to the United States. Their assumption was quite insulting to American Catholics. I ended up limiting my work with them to telling them that they were welcome to download my homilies from this website.

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 Catholics receive those who come into the faith on Easter. They, we, 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 told the Ephesians that he had a secret. It is as much a secret now as it was then. The secret is that God loves and cares for everyone, even if they are very different from each other. Nothing could be more divergent than the pagan Gentiles and the religious Jews. The big secret that remained a secret to the people of Paul's day and remains a secret for many of the people of our day is that God refuses to be limited in his love by our intolerance. He will not be limited in loving others by our view of what he should be like and how people should experience him. At the same time, if we are intolerant of others, then others will be denied seeing his presence in us. Spiritual arrogance, whether that of ancient pharisees or modern ones, hides the presence of the Lord.

"I have found the Lord!," the bumper sticker proclaims. Great, but do keep looking. You have only found one of the many facets of Infinite Truth, only one of the many ways that the Lord loves you. A retreat experience, the birth of a child, a recognition of the depths of love of a friendship or your marriage, a traumatic situation you have survived, your adjustment to living as a single Catholic parent, the courage it takes to deal with physical challenges and sickness, all of these are additional ways we can find the Lord. We have to keep searching for the Lord until the day we die. If we

are not physically dead when we stop searching for him, we will be spiritually dead.

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.