

Homily for the Epiphany of the Lord

January 8, 2023

St. Bavo Parish

Rev. Peter J. Pacini, C.S.C.

First Reading: Isaiah 60:1-6 (They shall come bearing gold and frankincense.)

Responsory: Psalm 72 (Lord, every nation on earth will adore you.)

Second Reading: Ephesians 3:2-3a, 5-6 (The Gentiles are coheirs of the promise in Christ Jesus.)

Gospel: Matthew 2:1-12 (The visit of the Magi.)

Today is the great Feast of the Epiphany, when Christians everywhere update our manger scenes by adding a few exotic-looking characters from the East. We push a couple of shepherds out of the way, park a camel outside the stable, and make room for three very well-dressed and distinguished looking gentlemen, who huddle around the Christ child and present their precious and very expensive gifts. Throughout the centuries, Christians have attempted to reconcile two contradictory accounts of Jesus' birth by mashing them together into this one scene, which appears *nowhere* in Scripture. Luke's version, in which the Holy Family is homeless and the newborn Jesus ends up lying in a manger, makes no mention of kings or astrologers from the East. The only people coming to see Jesus are a bunch of poor shepherds. Matthew's version is different in just about every detail. There is no mention of an inn, a manger, a stable, or shepherds. That's because, according to Matthew, the Holy Family *lives in Bethlehem*, not in Nazareth, and the star guiding the Magi to the Christ child stops over *their house*. These clearly are two completely different stories about the birth of Christ. Yet, both of them are making a similar point – that Jesus came into the world to save *all people*. The difference lies in which group of people each evangelist sees as most in danger of being *excluded*: the poor, or those who do not belong to the Jewish faith.

We used the Midnight Mass readings at all four of our Christmas masses. So, everyone heard the familiar story from the Gospel of Luke about Jesus being born into poverty. Whether historically accurate or not, Luke's version of events conveys a very important truth about Jesus and his saving mission, namely, that salvation through Christ is available to people at *all levels of society*, from the least to the greatest. Even as he was being acclaimed as a great healer, miracle worker, teacher, prophet and Messiah, Jesus always identified with the *poor* and the afflicted – the ones whom others overlook and ignore. Jesus never forgot the "little people," and he made sure that they knew his promise of salvation included them, too.

Matthew's story about the Magi from the East highlights another type of division – not between rich and poor, but between *Jews and Gentiles*. He wants to show that the birth of Jesus was a turning point not just for Jews, who awaited the coming of their Messiah, but for people of all nations and cultures around the world. As St. Paul said to the Ephesians: "It has now been revealed... that the Gentiles are coheirs, members of the same body, and copartners in the promise in Christ Jesus." In fact, history shows that many of Jesus' own people never recognized him as their Savior, while people from all corners of the world *have* come to believe in him. Matthew portrays that important truth by showing Jesus being born quietly at home in Bethlehem, with no one taking any notice of him until about two years later, when three

strangers show up at the royal court in Jerusalem. These mysterious “Wise Men” ask about a newborn King of the Jews, whose arrival they have deduced from carefully observing celestial signs. Naturally, King Herod and all of Jerusalem are “greatly troubled” by this news. They should be troubled, because it means that the Messiah has already come and that he’s been living among them for quite a while, yet these *pagans* from a distant country found out about him before any of his own people!

In reality, Jesus lived in obscurity for much longer than Luke’s and Matthew’s infancy narratives suggest. All four gospels seem to agree that when Jesus showed up to be baptized by John, at about age thirty, *nobody* had a clue who this stranger from Nazareth was. It’s not even clear whether people knew that he was special immediately *after* his baptism. Only after Jesus began to work miracles and preach with unmatched authority did anyone suspect that he was more than just the son of a common carpenter. But, astonishment at Jesus grew rapidly, as he demonstrated by many signs and wonders that he was the Messiah. These signs were the true “epiphanies,” the manifestations of Jesus’ divinity, which caused many to believe in him. The epiphany stories at the beginning of Matthew’s and Luke’s Gospels are not describing what *actually* happened at the time of Jesus’ birth or shortly thereafter. Rather, they are showing what his birth *meant* to a world shrouded in darkness, awaiting a Savior. They express *our belief* that this child, born in obscurity, has become a light to *all the nations* of the world and a beacon of hope for the rich and the poor alike.

In today’s First Reading, Isaiah prophesied that nations and kings would walk by the shining radiance of God’s people. He spoke of foreigners coming to Jerusalem to offer symbolic gifts of gold and frankincense to the Jewish leader, who would be both a King and a High Priest for his people. But, the way that God’s plan unfolded was not exactly as Isaiah described. The Prophet thought that peoples from many nations would see the marvels that the Lord had done *for the Jewish people*, especially bringing them back from exile, and foreigners would come streaming to Jerusalem to do homage to the Savior who had accomplished such wondrous deeds. However, it’s not at all clear whether these Gentiles would be able to *share* in the salvation of the Chosen People, unless perhaps, they converted to Judaism.

Matthew’s story of the Magi adopts some of Isaiah’s imagery, but his message is far more profound and expansive. The key difference can be seen in the gifts of the Magi. The first two gifts, gold and frankincense, are the same ones that Isaiah mentioned, and they appear to have the same symbolic meaning. They are offered to Jesus to honor him as a King and a High Priest, who will rule over and sanctify his people. However, the third gift, myrrh, gives new meaning to the other two, for it was used to prepare dead bodies for burial. Hence, the three gifts of the Magi, *taken together*, symbolize how Jesus assumed his royal power and offered the one perfect sacrifice to his heavenly Father by *dying* on the cross. Hence, Matthew is showing us that Christ’s *death and resurrection*, not his birth, have brought salvation to all who believe in him, *whether Jew or Gentile*.

So, the next time you rearrange your manger scene to make room for those Magi, remember that they represent people from all nations, all cultures, and all generations who have “found” the *Risen Christ* and the salvation that he offers to us all.