

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” THE EPIPHANY OF THE LORD
Isaiah 60: 1-6 Psalm 72 Ephesians 3: 2-3a, 5-6 Matthew 2: 1-12
by Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

The Magi had a fever. It wasn't the kind that a thermometer or a visit to the doctor would reveal. There were no quick cures for it either. "Just take a couple aspirins and you'll be back to normal before you know it." Not for this kind of fever. Their's was a restlessness that would not let them stay still. They had seen the star, and it was calling them to pack up, leave their friends, drinking buddies and polka partners to go off looking for who-knows-what. Remember, they did not have the answer when they started the journey. All they had was the quest-fever and the dissatisfaction with the way things were in their lives. If they had felt quite content or been willing to settle for the status quo, they would have resisted the urge to leave what they had known, set off for a strange land and inquire among foreigners, "Where is the one we seek?"

We do not know much about the Magi. For example, the text does not tell us there were three, as they are often depicted in paintings and creches. We do not know if they came from different nations or races. We are not sure if they were priests, royalty or astrologers. Their anonymity makes it possible for Christian tradition to place much symbolic meaning on them: they have come to symbolize diversity of race, ethnic background and nationalities. As today's reading from Ephesians suggests, God's grace has revealed the mystery to us that all peoples, not just a chosen few, will come to discover their place as, "co-heirs," partners in the promise in Christ through the gospel. Matthew has depicted in the Magi the gospel truth that seekers from all nations will come to recognize Christ and be welcome in his presence. And, that the promise of Israel's being a light for the nations, as the prophets anticipated, is now fulfilled in Christ.

Contentment isn't all it's cracked up to be. Coasting along may feel smooth and familiar, but it won't take us anywhere new. It won't take us on an uncomfortable journey where we don't know the landmarks; where we will have to keep trusting the voice inside that urges us not to turn back or stop. Leaving contentment behind will require us to keep looking up ahead, placing one foot in front of the other, asking questions and trusting. There will surely be doubts and regrets along the way, but new life will also open up for us and eventually, like the Magi, we will come to the place where God waits for us. What will God look like at that

moment? Certainly, what the Magi saw was hardly impressive; a poor family in a nondescript village and an infant. However, the Magi had been led by the light of the star. Was it a star in the heavens or an interior light that kept them looking and then shone brightly for them, revealing the truth at the end of their quest?

God was present among the obscure; hidden in an out-of-the-way place. No splash, no “color commentator” to make God’s presence exciting for the sporting spectator. Yet, it took three strangers from another place and tradition to recognize someone special. Does it take the outsider in our midst to help us see beneath the surface or admit what we have been afraid to admit about our lives? So many disclaim the presence of God in their lives or down play and hide the gifts they have. Sometimes it’s the stranger or the person outside our familial surroundings who makes us aware of how gifted by God we are. People like teachers, mentors, religious guides, friends, etc., are often like the Magi visitors, who come from elsewhere and spot the divine light in us. They “manifest” (for that is what Epiphany is about, the manifestation of God in our world) to us the God we have been overlooking. These are light-bearers, stars that guide us to meet the Holy Presence in our lives and in the world around us. They shine a light before us and encourage us to venture out, to see life and ourselves from another perspective.

J. Ronald Knott (cf. below) tells a story of a tv interview of an old woman in eastern Kentucky. It seems she had spent all of her life without traveling more than five miles from where she was born. When asked why she never traveled further than that she said, “I just don’t believe in going places.” That means she never saw even the places that were comparatively close—like Louisville, Churchill Downs, the blue grass country and the horse farms around Lexington, Howe Caverns, the Ohio River. She didn’t have much in common with the Magi-- these were travelers. But they were more than tourists with maps, guide books and cameras in hand. They were searchers, out on a quest to discover the God up ahead of them. Had they never left home they might not have found what they were looking for—or found themselves either.

For those of us who leave the familiar and follow a distant light we may find ourselves in a place we never would have imagined going. There we will meet the divine—but in disguise, of course. For the Magi it was the infant in the crib. For us, the journey may take us to entirely new places: teaching religion to teenagers in the church basement; our wedding day and a person we have found and with whom we have decided to journey the rest of our days; a new way of praying; a

bereavement group that begins to open new life for us after a death; a vocation in ministry; old age, faced not with dread, but excitement and discovery; new friends who have less materially to share, but more spiritually, etc.

We have come to church to celebrate Epiphany. How else might we celebrate this feast of recognition? We might recognize and honor the divine presence in the less important of our society: the children around us; those who clear our tables in restaurants; who sell us newspapers on the corner; who collect our garbage; who harvest our crops; who are very aged; who are weak, infirmed or dying.

Today we also ask God to shake us out of our religious complacency and, like the Magi, stir up a hunger for God in us. Ask for the courage to let go of the comfortable and familiar and request the energy to once again go looking for God. Ask to be open to finding the holy in unfamiliar and “unholy” places. Ask for forgiveness for accepting what is immediately around us and for being satisfied with the status quo. Ask for the grace not to be disappointed when God isn’t found in the routine of familiar prayers and predictable ritual. Ask for a sense of wonder and awe in the little things of life that contain the spark of the divine. Ask for the spirit of a searcher, one willing to look up and follow a star beyond familiar borders. Ask to be able to put aside barriers that keep us apart from “the others”. Ask for the help to recognize the revelation of God, despite all appearances to the contrary. Ask for an Epiphany.

QUOTABLE

[In the church], instead of talking people into going on spiritual adventure, we often just led religious tours. We give up the goal of transforming people and settle for conformity. If you think taking a tour of shrines of the Holy Land is the same as walking in the footsteps of Jesus, you’re not on a spiritual adventure, you’re on a package tour. These Magi people were not on a tour. They were on a scary, spiritual adventure—one that took massive amounts of personal courage. ... Too many of us just don’t believe in going places. There is so much about our church that values keeping people in bounds, constraining the adventurous. We often punish the adventurous and reward, protect and coddle the mediocre. Just like the Magi, Jesus left his carpenter shop and went on a spiritual adventure. He went about inviting others to drop what they were doing and follow him without looking back.

---J. Ronald Knott, pgs. 42-43.

ONE GOOD BOOK FOR THE PREACHER:

J. Ronald Knott, AN ENCOURAGING WORD: RENEWED HEARTS, RENEWED CHURCH. New York: Crossroad Publishing Co., 1995. Paper, \$15.95.

Consists of forty lectionary-based homilies Knott preached while he was pastor of the Cathedral of the Assumption in Louisville, KY. During his pastorate the formerly dwindling congregation grew significantly and many credit his preaching as a key reason for this growth. These homilies show why people were attracted to hear him, They are thoughtful, humorous, biblically based and draw from our daily lives to show God working among us and to challenge us to be the people baptism calls us to be.

A CATECHIST'S RESPONSE: (To the Christmas "First Impressions" reflection of John 1)

Dear Jude,

A while ago when I was reflecting on this text I had an Epiphany moment! I suddenly understood that the Word (with a capital letter) meant Jesus Christ. It isn't that I hadn't understood it before, really, rather the implications for my life as a catechist and as a disciple/apostle had not been made clear.

As a catechist I am called to "echo the word". If I add the capital letter it reads differently: "echo the Word" Always, I had exclusively thought that my work was to echo Scripture and Tradition. Could it be that I was also to echo Jesus, the Word made flesh? And if so, what did this mean? I recalled his words, "I am the Way, the Truth and the Light, no one comes to the Father except by me". Not only in my words, actions and attitudes in daily life was Jesus supposed to be "the center" -- but also in my understanding of and proclamation of the scripture. I am sure this doesn't sound too exciting, but for me it was a revolutionary new idea. Since that time, I have come to see that everything I echo from scripture can somehow be better understood by holding it up to the Light. Like a crystal that shows its many different facets when held to light, so the scripture comes alive, gives hope and is more relevant when shared from a Christological perspective.

Am I on track here at all or was what I heard something akin to indigestion??

Thanks for reminding me!

----Lynne Worthington, Durham, N.C.

JUSTICE NOTES:

The offices of environmental organizations may not be the most efficient places in the world, but I am always impressed by the passion and commitment of those working there and the creativity embodied in the posters and cartoons that festoon the walls and, even, the ceiling. Yet as a Catholic missionary, I find it very significant and sad, that whilst the text on the posters might come from Chief Seattle's address or the Indian poet Tagore, I have never seen a quotation from the Bible or a reference to the words of Jesus. It often transpires that many of the people working in these offices promoting campaigns as diverse as biodiversity, organic farming or water conservation are dedicated Christians, but it seems that very little inspiration for their work flows either from the teachings of the Church or the life of Jesus. This is a tragedy, especially for the Christian Churches, because it means that the Good News of Jesus has nothing to contribute to addressing the most crucial issue of late 20th century, the rampant and often irreversible destruction of God's creation.

It is particularly tragic because Christians and others have much to learn from the attitude of respect which Jesus displayed towards the natural world. For example, there is no support in the New Testament for an exploitative, throw-away consumer society which in the last four decades has destroyed the natural world in so many parts of the globe and produced mountains of non-biodegradable and toxic waste which will plague the people and creatures of planet Earth for centuries. In the New Testament the disciples of Jesus are called upon to live lightly on the earth - 'take nothing for your journey, no staff, nor bag, nor bread, nor money; and do not have two tunics' (Luke 9:1-6). Jesus constantly warned about the dangers of attachment to wealth, possessions, or power. The forces which are impoverishing hundreds of millions of people in the Third World, and at the same time destroying the planet, very often spring from greed and the allure of mammon. 'How hard it is for those who have riches to enter the kingdom of God' (Mark 10:23; Luke 16:19-31); cf. Matt 19:23-24; Luke 18:18-23). 'Fool! This very night the demand will be made for your soul; and this hoard of yours, whose will it be then?' (Luke 12:16-21).

Jesus grew up in a rural environment and had an intimacy and familiarity with a variety of God's creatures and the processes of nature. It is clear from his teaching that he was not driven by any urge to dominate or control either his fellow human beings or the world of nature. Rather he displayed an appreciative and contemplative attitude towards creation which was rooted in His Father's love for

all creation. "Think of the ravens. They do not sow or reap; they have no storehouses and no barns; yet God feeds them' (Luke 12:24) (NJB). The gospels warn against the urge to continually accumulate more and more goods. God will provide for our legitimate needs: 'are you not worth more than the birds?' (Luke 12:24).

The gospels tell us that nature played an important role in Jesus' life. At his birth, Luke tells us that 'he was laid in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn' (Luke 2:7). Pious tradition has immortalized this in the crib which appears in many Christian homes and churches during the Christmas season. Mary, Joseph and the animals surround Jesus at his birth. He was first greeted by people who were 'keeping watch over their flocks by night' (Luke 2:8). Mark tells us that the spirit drove him into the wilderness. 'And he was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels ministered to him' (Mark 1:13) (RSV).

----- Sean McDonagh SSC, From the Columban webpage www.columban.com
Ecology and Religion: A GREEN CHRISTOLOGY: "I HAVE COME THAT THEY MAY HAVE LIFE AND HAVE IT TO THE FULL" (JOHN 10:10).

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Thank you.

"Blessings on your preaching",
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