

Epiphany

Preached January 6, 2019; St. Peter Catholic Church, The Dalles, Oregon

Christmas is a celebration of the true light coming into a world darkened by sin. Christmas celebrates the light of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, coming to his own people Israel, in fulfillment of the ancient prophecies; Epiphany, which we celebrate today, celebrates the same light shining out from Jerusalem to all the nations of the earth. *Nations shall walk by your light and kings by your shining radiance.* And St. Paul tells us that *Gentiles are coheirs, members of the same body, and copartners (with the Jews) in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.*

The whole of Scripture divides the human race into two parts; the Jews, who were the people of God, who received the covenant and who knew and worshipped the one true God, and the Gentiles, who were the remaining nations of the earth, who walked in the darkness of ignorance and sin, without God. Jesus Christ, Son of God and Savior, brought the light of God also to the Gentiles. In the words of St. Paul *through his flesh he breaks down the dividing wall of enmity (between Jew and Gentile) ... that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, establishing peace.* (Eph 14,15)

All of this is truly wonderful and promises something even more wonderful, but we need to recognize the 'down side': when the light comes into the world, the darkness is exposed, and the ugliness of human sin and corruption is revealed.

We see this ugly reality in today's Gospel in the cold reception that the Magi receive in Jerusalem from King Herod and from the chief priests and the scribes.

Well the light of Christ, the light of his birth, the light of his epiphany (or manifestation) shines upon the world today; we cannot receive that light unless we recognize the ugliness that it exposes. The year past was certainly a year of ugly human realities being exposed to the light. Yet, only when such realities are brought to the light can we find healing and salvation.

Today, through the prophet Isaiah, the light of Epiphany reveals a disturbing state of affairs.

From the time of the Emperor Constantine to the time of the Protestant Revolution (a period of about 1,200 years) the fulfillment of the prophecy of Isaiah seemed evident for all to see. Today that hardly seems the case.

We need to trace some of the history here.

The prophet spoke some 500-700 years before the birth of Christ; at that time it could have been said that the true God was known only among the people of Israel. Outside of the people of Israel there might have been occasional individuals who had true knowledge and reverence for God the Creator, but there was no people who possessed such knowledge. In that sense, it could already have been said that darkness covered the earth while the Lord shined only upon Jerusalem.

Nevertheless, from the time of Isaiah to the time of Jesus Christ, the city of Jerusalem, the same city that now exists in modern Israel, but which was then the Holy City, the City of God, was subject to foreign domination because of the infidelity of leaders and people to the covenant.

The prophet spoke of a reversal of this situation in which the light of God would shine forth from Jerusalem and foreign nations would come to Jerusalem to worship the Lord.

The arrival of the Magi in Jerusalem to give homage to the newborn King of the Jews was first fruits of the conversion of the Gentiles, the non-Jewish peoples, to Christ.

By the time of the Emperor Constantine, about 300 years later, the various peoples of the Roman Empire had largely come to believe in Christ and from the time of Constantine the Empire itself became Christian. As the western Empire collapsed and as new peoples moved into various territories there would later follow the conversion of the French, the Celtic, the English, the Spanish peoples, and the German peoples; later the Scandinavian and the Slavic peoples would come to believe in Christ as well.

This miracle of conversion was repeated in the new world when the peoples of Mexico came and prostrated themselves at the feet of the Virgin of Guadalupe.

The key point here is we are not just speaking about individuals believing in Christ, but the conversion of whole peoples, cultures, and political regimes. Those conversions may have been more or less perfect, but they were real.

From all these peoples pilgrims came to Jerusalem to do honor to the places that had been sanctified by the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Yet, it was not necessary to go to Jerusalem itself, because Jerusalem is now wherever Jesus Christ was found, which is on every altar where the Eucharist was celebrated and in every tabernacle where the Blessed Sacrament is reserved.

The prophet had announced: *Kings shall walk by your shining radiance*. A king is not just a ruler, but a representative before God and embodiment of his people. So we can consider the remarkable list of medieval kings whom the Church has proclaimed as saints: St. Wenceslaus of Bohemia, St. Henry, Duke of Bavaria and Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire; St. Stephen of Hungary; St. Edward the Confessor of England; St. Ferdinand of Castile; St. Louis of France.

During the time of these holy kings (from the 10th to 13th century) any Christian preacher could have referred to the conversion of the nations to Christ as an evident fact celebrated in the Feast of Epiphany. The point is not that the Middle Ages were paradise on earth, but that the prophecy had received an evident fulfillment in the conversion of the nations to Christ. In the time of the prophet Isaiah there was one nation in all the earth that worshipped the God of Israel, the Creator, by the Middle Ages there were many that did so.

Now, we come to our own time and there are none. Jesus Christ has his worshippers all over the earth; there are some peoples, perhaps Poland, perhaps Mexico, perhaps the Philippines, perhaps some African peoples, where the faith is still strong among the rank and file of the people. Still, I don't know that we could say that there is a truly Catholic or even Christian nation in all the earth.

Now, when a person who once believed in Christ rejects the faith he once had that is called 'apostasy', perhaps the worst of all sins. Well, Europe, the one time cradle of the faith, received from St. Peter and St. Paul, once filled with Catholic nations, has committed apostasy. That is an immense tragedy.

That means that the Church, in which the reality symbolized by Jerusalem is brought to fulfillment, is in a similar situation to city of Jerusalem in the time of Christ; she is subject to foreign domination, domination by those who do not believe or who do not truly believe in Christ.

That is the first ugly reality we see today in the light of Christ's Epiphany. Once again *darkness covers the earth and thick clouds covers the peoples.*

This leads us to the second ugly reality, which is seen in the light of today's Gospel.

The Magi arrive in Jerusalem, the City of God, and they find corruption; they find an evil king and religious leaders who have the knowledge of the truth, but have compromised with the evil king for the sake of power and influence. The chief priests and scribes are able to tell King Herod where the Christ is to be born, but they have no interest in worshipping him.

This is to a large extent the scandal of the Church today. We need to pray for conversion and renewal among our bishops because it is becoming increasingly evident that there has been a catastrophic failure of leadership on their part.

All too often they have acted as the chief priests and scribes in today's Gospel; they have had the answers that faith gives, but they have not been interested so much in teaching or in worshipping, as in seeking political influence or making compromises to keep peace. In the end, they have failed on all counts; as teachers of the faith, as priests leading the people in the worship of God, and in their attempts to wield political influence.

Even so, we need to learn a lesson from the Magi. They were able to arrive at Jerusalem following the light of the star, but they were not able to arrive at the feet of the child Jesus in Bethlehem except by listening to the teaching of the corrupt chief priests and scribes!

As an adult convert my own entrance into the Church and experience of the Church has in some ways followed the pattern of the Magi. By the grace of God I came to the Church looking for Jesus Christ. I came to the right place because Jesus Christ is indeed found in his Church. Nevertheless, coming into the Church my experience was at times like that of the Magi arriving in Jerusalem: disappointment with the leadership and even corruption.

Still, the Jerusalem of Herod does not have the last word. We need to consider Bethlehem: At the time of Jesus' birth it was away from the corridors of power and wealth, but as the birthplace of the ancient King David it was rich in tradition. It is also, by its name, the "House of Bread".

Jesus Christ is found in the Catholic Church, but he is found away from the corridors of power and wealth, among those who are held in contempt by the world, but who hold fast to sacred Tradition, and who adore Jesus Christ, the Bread of Life, in the simplicity of the appearance of bread. The families today that most reflect the Holy Family of Bethlehem are those families that most truly live by the Holy Eucharist. Modern day Magi will find Jesus in the same place.

Darkness covers the earth and thick clouds covers the peoples but in those families the light of the Lord shines brightly until everything will be brought to completion in the new and eternal Jerusalem that comes down out of heaven from God. (cf. Rev 21:2, 22-27)