

First Impressions EPIPHANY OF THE LORD

Isaiah 60: 1-6 Psalm 72 Ephesians 3: 2-3a, 5-6 Matthew 2: 1-12

By: Jude

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Dear Preachers:

Epiphany means manifestation. In ancient Egypt this was the date the winter solstice was celebrated. It was a feast of light in the darkest time of the year. Early Christians turned the feast into a celebration of Jesus' coming to dispel the darkness of ignorance and sin. Eastern and Orthodox Christians celebrate Jesus' birth today. Today's feast reveals how and where Christ is manifested to us. The scriptures and liturgy for Epiphany strike a light into whatever darkness we currently find ourselves and offer help as we struggle to keep our bearings and not lose hope. The feast emphasizes that God's light has entered the world and is for all people. Light amid darkness; hope in despair.

The Isaiah reading comes from a selection of songs (Is. 56-66) that describes God's restoration of the people and the rebuilding of Jerusalem and its temple. The reading starts with a command, "Rise up in splendor, Jerusalem!" It reminds me of my mother's waking me from sleep to go to school. "Rise and shine!" The job of waking from sleep, especially on a cold winter's morning while it was still dark outside, was mine to accomplish. But when God summons Jerusalem, God's Word is an enabling word. Jerusalem doesn't have to restore herself alone, God is coming. God is coming in glory, a shining light, to raise up the community. The world is shrouded in darkness, but Jerusalem shall shine with God's light and the Gentiles ("the nations") shall see that light and be drawn to it.

Isaiah speaks of a time of light, when people will be see God's splendor and will shine. "Then you shall be radiant at what you see." Do you know people who radiate, shine, because of their faith--- because of what they see? They are calm and trusting amid adversity; wise teachers of our youth in parish religion classes; musicians who lead and participate in our choir; diligent people of prayer frequently found in church and at scripture and prayer groups; visitors to the sick as ministers of the parish community; volunteers in the office or at special parish functions; bearers of food to needy families; providers of free legal or medical service to those who can't afford it. These are not the occasional people, rather, they do good works

consistently and for years. They have seen a vision of God, been guided by a light, and they respond in love. “Then you shall be radiant at what you see.”

The gospel begins with an oblique mention of the darkness: Jesus was born into a dark world, when Herod was the king. But quickly the darkness is pierced, for the Magi come to Jerusalem from the east following the light of the star. John J. Pilch (*The Cultural World of Jesus: Sunday by Sunday, Cycle A*. Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1995), notes that Magi weren’t “kings.” They weren’t quite “wise men” either, and “astrologers” can be a misleading title for them because of the term’s modern connotations. They were an upper caste of political-religious advisers to ancient rulers in, what is now, Iran and Iraq.

In Matthew’s account, the Magi follow the star, find Jesus, venerate him and quickly depart. They have come, they say, to worship the “newborn king of the Jews.” Traditionally, Pilch says, Magi in the royal courts of the East, resisted the imperialism of the West and, of course, would have been opposed to the Roman empire. They arrive at the court of the Roman’s puppet-king Herod, seeking a newborn king in a land occupied by the very Romans they would have resisted. Their presence and quest announce a king’s dominion will extend beyond the confines of Israel and include the ancient Near East. The Magi’s questions and search tell Herod that the one who will draw subjects, even from the East, will come, not from the already established courts of power, but from a humble family in Bethlehem.

The arriving light will illumine the lives of the least on the earth and reveal that, while they count for nothing in the world’s eyes, God has seen their plight and has chosen to dwell with them. At first glance, the Magi seem to be the main characters in the drama, today seems to be, “the day of the three kings.” But they are not central to the story, the emphasis is on Christ. It is the day, not of the three kings, but of Christ’s revelation. Our God is reaching out to all people, especially those considered outsiders and strangers—like the three Magi.

The gospel reminds us that not all will see and respond to the light. The Magi see it and respond; Herod, advised by the chief priests and scribes, should have seen and accepted God’s light, but instead, rejected it. The irony of today’s gospel is that those who were closest in religion and tradition, who knew the scriptures and prophecies about the messiah, who, in a way, did have the light, did not see or respond to it. While those who were complete outsiders, when they saw the light,

got up and followed it to the Christ child.

Epiphany is the feast of those called by God's grace to leave behind the familiar and accustomed and to go searching for Christ in, what seems to be, the most unlikely places. Where will we find him and what gifts shall we bring when we discover Christ in our world? In place of frankincense, we could advocate for poor families, especially for single parents and the newborn. There are 25 million poor children in our otherwise-wealthy country, and untold numbers throughout the world. In place of gold, we could contribute to help those at shelters for homeless families, or international programs for children and the aged. In place of myrrh, we could visit the sick and dying.

The gospel story tells of a light in the sky that guides the foreigners to Christ. We don't have the star; but grace is continually given to help us find Christ. God's grace does what the star did for the Magi, it guides us to the out-of-the way places where Christ can be found. The Magi came bearing the types of gifts one would bring to royalty in a palace. But today Christ isn't found in a palace; he isn't rich, he is poor. The Epiphany reminds us that each day Christ manifests himself to us in the world's lesser places and in surprising people. Those are the places to go looking and bearing gifts—starting with the most important gift, ourselves.

A lot of our activities over these past weeks have put emphasis on our preparations for the feast of Christ's birth. But these days aren't primarily about what we have done and can do. It is clear from our scriptures that God is the key Actor in our drama; God has revealed good news to a people in darkness. That's what Isaiah tells us, "...but upon you the Lord shines...." That's what Paul announces, "...the mystery was made known to me by revelation....," and that's what Matthew affirms when the Magi come from the east guided by a star. From the beginning the scriptures name God as a giving God and today we again celebrate God's self-giving. The Epiphany shines a light on the profound mystery of our faith, that God has given God's self totally to our world.

Some parishes may want to add more candles to their celebration of this feast. Most entrance processions include two altar servers carrying candles to be placed by the sides of the altar. Why not have others in the procession also carry lighted candles to the sanctuary? Some candles might be placed by the ambo, or at the baptismal font. We know that symbols sometimes speak more powerfully than

words and touch people at a deep place. An entrance procession of lighted candles into a dimmed church and placed at strategic places in the sanctuary will proclaim that our light, Christ, has joined us and has manifested himself to the world.

QUOTABLE

“Journey of the Magi.”

A cold coming we had of it,
Just the worst time of the year
For a journey, and such a long journey:
The ways deep and the weather sharp,
The very dead of winter.
And the camels galled, sore-footed, refractory,
Lying down in the melting snow.
There were times we regretted
The summer palaces on slopes, the terraces,
And the silken girls bringing sherbet.
Then the camel men cursing and grumbling
And running away, and wanting their liquor and women,
And the night-fires going out, and the lack of shelters,
And the cities hostile and the towns unfriendly
And the villages dirty and charging high prices:
A hard time we had of it.
At the end we preferred to travel all night,
Sleeping in snatches,
With the voices singing in our ears, saying
That this was all folly.
Then at dawn we came down to a temperate valley,
Wet, below the snow line, smelling of vegetation;
With a running stream and a water-mill beating the darkness,
And three trees on the low sky,
And an old white horse galloped away in the meadow.
Then we came to a tavern with vine-leaves over the lintel,
Six hands at an open door dicing for pieces of silver,
And feet kicking the empty wine-skins.
But there was no information, and so we continued

And arrived at evening, not a moment too soon
Finding the place; it was (you may say) satisfactory.

All this was a long time ago, I remember,
And I would do it again, but set down
This set down
This: were we led all that way for
Birth or Death? There was a Birth, certainly,
We had evidence and no doubt. I had seen birth and death,
But had thought they were different; this Birth was
Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death.
We returned to our places, these Kingdoms,
But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation,
With an alien people clutching their gods.
I should be glad of another death.

----T. S. Eliot

JUSTICE NOTES

RESPECT LIFE: BE LIGHT

“Nations shall walk by your light, and kings by your shining radiance. Raise your eyes and look about; they all gather and come to you; your sons come from afar, and your daughters in the arms of their nurses.” (Isaiah 60:3-4)

***“It is a poverty to decide a child must die so that you may live as you wish.”
(Mother Teresa of Calcutta)***

Catholic Christians are people of life who see each human person, as Jesus did, as worthy recipients of our love and protection. The Gospel of Jesus calls us to defend all life from conception to natural death. The unborn are an especially defenseless segment of the population. It is a national scandal that on average 4,000 abortions are performed daily in this country.

What can I do?

Join other defenders of Life in the annual “March for Life” Check the “March for Life” webpage for locations of vigils near you. <http://www.marchforlife.org/> The annual Washington “March for Life” will be January 22, 2008

Support Birthchoice, a local non-profit organization that offers a wide range of services to women facing crisis pregnancies. Donations of time, money and of baby items (everything from clothes to car seats) are gladly accepted.

Stay informed. Find out about proposed legislation on issues of life and death before state and federal legislatures. Contact your representatives. Let them know you are a registered voter in their district and want their support for bills which protect life. Visit the following websites for legislative updates and information: North Carolina specific: <http://www.ncrtl.org/> and our US Catholic Bishops’ site: <http://www.usccb.org/prolife/>

PRAY for an end to all practices which destroy and diminish life: war, abortion, capital punishment, euthanasia, discrimination, poverty etc.

Read Pope John Paul II’s encyclical Gospel of Life [Evangelium Vitae]. In this work the Holy Father touches on a variety of issues which followers of Jesus’ Gospel of Life are confronted with in today’s modern society: abortion, euthanasia, war, capital punishment, cloning, en vitro fertilization, and related matters. http://www.vatican.va/edocs/ENG0141/_INDEX.HTM

(Submitted by Anne and Bill Werdel, from the parish bulletin of Sacred Heart Cathedral, Raleigh, NC)

POSTCARDS TO DEATH ROW INMATES

Inmates on death row are the most forgotten people in the prison system. Each week I am posting in this space several inmates’ names and locations. I invite you to write a postcard to one or more of them to let them know that: we have not forgotten them; are praying for them and their families; or, whatever personal encouragement you might like to give them. If you like, tell them you heard about them through North Carolina’s, “People of Faith Against the Death Penalty.” If the inmate responds, you might consider becoming pen pals.

Please write to:.....

Eddie Robinson	#0347839	(On death row since 5/19/92)
Ernest P. Carver	#0264009	(9/23/92)
Carl Moseley	#0294214)	(10/1/92)

---Central Prison 1300 Western Blvd. Raleigh, NC 27606

ANNOUNCEMENTS

1. Two new CDs Available: **“FIRST IMPRESSIONS PREACHING REFLECTIONS”**
“Liturgical year A,” which begins in Advent and contains **three** reflections for almost all the Sundays and major feasts for the year. It also has book reviews and additional essays related to preaching.

“Liturgical years, A, B and C,” reflections on the three-year cycle.

If you are a preacher, lead a Lectionary-based scripture group, or are a member of a liturgical team, these CDs will be helpful in your preparation process. Individual worshipers report they also use these reflections as they prepare for Sunday liturgy.

You can order the CDs by going to our webpage: www.preacherexchange.com and clicking on the "First Impressions" CDs link on the left.

2. I get notes from people responding to these reflections. Sometimes they tell how they use “First Impressions” in their ministry and for personal use. Others respond to the reflections, make suggestions and additions. I think our readers would benefit from these additional thoughts. If you drop me a BRIEF note, I will be happy to add your thoughts and reflections to my own. (Judeop@Juno.com)

3. Our webpage: <http://www.preacherexchange.com>

Where you will find “Preachers’ Exchange,” which includes "First Impressions" and “Homilias Dominicales,” as well as articles, book reviews and quotes pertinent to preaching.

4. “Homilias Dominicales”-- these Spanish reflections are written by three friars of the Southern Dominican Province, Jose David Padilla, OP, Wilmo Candanedo, OP and two Dominican sisters, Regina Mc Carthy, OP and Doris Regan, OP. Like “First Impressions”, “Homilias Dominicales” are a preacher’s early reflections on the upcoming Sunday readings and liturgy. So, if you or a friend would like to receive “Homilias Dominicales” drop a note to John Boll, O.P. at: Jboll@opsouth.org or jboll@preacherexchange.org

5. "First Impressions" is a service to preachers and those wishing to prepare for Sunday worship. It is sponsored by the Southern Dominican Province, U.S.A. If you would like "First Impressions" sent weekly to a friend, send a note to John Boll at the above Email address.

DONATIONS

If you would like to support this ministry, please send tax deductible contributions to Jude Siciliano, O.P., whose address is listed below. Make checks to: Dominican Friars of Raleigh. Or, go to our webpage to make an online donation: <http://www.preacherexchange.com>

Thank you.

Blessings on your preaching,

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