

SECOND SUNDAY AFTER CHRISTMAS, JANUARY 2, 2022

Today is the second Sunday after Christmas and Thursday is the Feast of the Epiphany so it is appropriate for us to read the gospel from Matthew about the Wisemen and to celebrate the Feast of the Epiphany. But did you know that more people in the world celebrate Epiphany than Christmas? Outside of the US and Britain December 25th is just a quiet religious day while January 6th is the big celebration.

In Spanish-speaking countries Epiphany is called Day of the Three Kings, and it's traditional to have processions and fiestas, and light luminarias to guide the three kings to the infant Jesus. In Eastern Europe, people gather for bonfires and dancing and spiced wine. In the Philippines and Mexico, children leave their shoes out for the Kings to put presents into, much like we do for Santa Claus.

In India, the Epiphany is celebrated with a big fair outside the church with lots of festive foods. Three boys are chosen from the parish to represent the Three Kings and they are robed in red and draped in jewels as they enter the church to present their gifts to the baby Jesus.

The Eastern Orthodox Christians call Epiphany "Theophany," meaning, roughly, "vision of God," and the custom in Russia is to chop holes in the ice, bless the waters, and go swimming in remembrance of Jesus' baptism in the Jordan river. Perhaps that's where our custom of the New Year's Polar Bear plunge comes from!

In Germany children go house to house collecting for charity, and when they receive a gift, they chalk a blessing on the door with letters representing the names of the Wise Men. In England, people also go house to house singing songs in exchange for spiced food and drink, representing the spices that the wise men brought. You may have heard of the custom of "wassailing"—here we come a wassailing—that's an English custom.

In France and French-speaking areas of the world, Epiphany marks the beginning of the season of Mardi Gras and the custom is to feast on King Cake. Inside the cake, a trinket is hidden, perhaps a small plastic baby or a bean, and the person who finds the bean or baby becomes King for the Day.

In almost all of the cultures, stars are prominent as well as candles, reminding people of the "star of wonder" that led the Magi, and also telling how Jesus is the Light of the world. The reason for all the charming customs and traditions is because Jesus was born not just for Jews, but also Gentiles. The wise men coming from the East represent all these non-Jewish nations for whom Jesus is the light of the world. The story of the three wise men in Matthew is purposefully written to emphasize that there are no select groups of people. We are all one in God.

There is a painting in the National Museum of Art in Washington DC called "The Adoration of the Magi" by Fra Angelico and Filippo Lippo that depicts this aspect of the Epiphany perfectly. What is fascinating about this painting is the startling profusion of human beings who come to adore the infant Jesus. They seem to be streaming in from all over the place from oriental rulers to leprous beggars and everybody in between. This painting shows the fullness of the human community surrounding Jesus. God is bringing together categories of people you normally wouldn't mention in the same breath. And in bringing people together beyond category, God is destroying the idea of all human categories, forever.

Let's face it, we live in a time where people everywhere seem to tolerate a deep ideological divide and where compromise is often seen as a negative – as a weakness. Party and tribal purity, in which the classic “us” verses “them” dominates. It's a time of believing that if you are not like us, you must be against us. If you do not agree with us, you must be wrong. Only “we” have the right answer or access to God. This is a time when the list of “us” verses “them” seems almost endless

There's a poem by Edwin Markham called “Outwitted” whose opening line is: “He drew a circle that shut me out –Heretic, rebel, a thing to flout.” The story of wise men paying homage to the Christ child marks the beginning of a new understanding that is inclusive of all people. It is the story of a God of all people, a God of unity, a God who moves his people beyond the trap of “us” against “them.” It is like the final two lines of Markham's poem: “But love and I had the wit to win: We drew a circle and took him in!”

Wise men, bringing gifts, highlight the fact that the ultimate gift is that God loves all people, in all times, in all places – a gift for every contentious “us” against “them.” It's an empowering movement toward a spirit of fundamental unity. The Epiphany gospel story is a powerful symbol of something critically important in the development of our faith – in the understanding of who and what God is. The transition from “us” versus “them” to a clearer view of the unity of all people does not come easily, however.

The meaning of today's readings reminds us of the challenge for all people to live in a spirit of unity. The Body of Christ is a unifying image that can draw us toward the challenge of eliminating current divisiveness. The three foreigners of today's gospel remind us once more that our task is to embrace and teach the view that no one is so different that we dare treat them with less love or less respect than we would show those whom we know as brothers and sisters. There is no gentile, no “other” who exists beyond the circle of God's love. It reminds us that divisiveness like we experience so often is not consistent with the values of God.

In my former parish we had decided to create new vestments for the Epiphany season. Instead of using the traditional green we chose the color yellow to emphasize the fact that the Epiphany season is about the light of Christ dispelling the darkness in our lives. In particular my chasuble had a star that circled the neck and had insets of iridescent panels of fabric to represent a prism or a kaleidoscope. The iridescent panels represented the varied colors of the human race and more importantly the light of Christ being reflected in and through all of us. The light of Christ is reflected in us so we can reflect the light of Christ to others so that we too can see our brother and sister in everyone we meet.

The wisemen blazed a trail that has been followed ever since that day. It is a trail that leads in new directions, in new ways of relating to God. It is a trail that leads us toward a new vision, a new society. Surely it is our life work as Christians to follow that star, to search for the whereabouts of Christ in every situation, to see where and how and in what area we can make a difference. We are called to be the stars that lead through the darkness of night to Christ, the light of the world. We are bearers of the light of Christ

Remember every encounter with someone, each connection we find, is part of our being connected with the God that made us. Let us resolve this year to look forward to meeting God in the people we meet. Let us remember to seek and serve Christ in all persons loving our neighbors as ourselves. And let us rejoice that in doing so we reach out into a needy world with the light of Christ, a light that transforms all of creation. Amen.