

January 3, 2021 11:30 a.m. St. Augustine Cathedral

Epiphany of the Lord

For many people, Christmas was over on December 26th. But for us, as People of Faith, we continue to celebrate Christmas for another whole week until next Sunday's Feast of the Baptism of the Lord.

Today, we get to celebrate the wondrous and mysterious Feast of the Epiphany, which in recent years has been celebrated on the Second Sunday after Christmas. But it used to always be celebrated on January 6th, the Twelfth Day of Christmas, and was oftentimes referred to as "Little Christmas". In fact in many countries of the world, that's still the day when Christmas gifts are exchanged in honor of the Three Wise Men, whom we heard about in today's Gospel passage, who brought their gifts of Gold, Frankincense and Myrrh to the Baby Jesus.

We need to celebrate Christmas during this Season, and beyond, because Christmas is one of the two most central events in all of Salvation History. It has been an ancient tradition that every year on the Feast of Epiphany, a Proclamation is made, as we heard our Cantor do just a few moments ago, announcing the date of Easter, which of course is the other of the two most central Events in Salvation History. As that Proclamation made clear, Easter 2021 will be celebrated on April 4th, just 3 months from tomorrow.

Christmas is extremely important because it celebrates the Birth of Jesus. But the reason why God sent His Son to be born and to live among us is so that He could accomplish the redemption of the world and to bring us all the Gift of Salvation. And the only way He could do so was by suffering and dying on the Cross for our sins, and then being gloriously raised on the 3rd Day---Easter. That is why Christmas and Easter are **the most** important Feasts of the Year. And so as we should have the Joy of Christmas and the Glory of Easter at the center of our lives every day of the year. Both Christmas and Easter are what makes all the difference in the world in our daily lives.

The Feast of the Epiphany is also significant because it's the Day of the Three Kings. I remember as a child being so excited, knowing that when we got to church, we would get to see the 3 Kings and their Camels in the Manger scene, who until today, would be hidden, or set way off to the side; but on this Feast, they would make their grand appearance in this Manger scene---as they've done here today---and the shepherds would have to move back or be rearranged to make room for the 3 Kings.

We only know about the "Magi" from the Gospel of St. Matthew, which we just listened to. They are somewhat "mysterious" persons, about whom we know very little; they make their appearance in dramatic fashion, and then disappear, never to be heard from again. We know them as "Kings", as "Magi", and as "Astrologers". The Gospel calls them "Magi"; tradition dubs them "Kings". Similarly the Gospel doesn't tell us how many there were; tradition has decided there were 3 of them. We do know that they came from the "Far East", which means that they were Gentiles, not Jews. We can deduce that they were well-educated (which accounts for the title "Wise Men"); they were persons of some wealth and resources (which accounts for the title of "Kings"); and they were somewhat spiritual persons, since they were "seeking answers" from their study of the stars (which is how they come to be known as "Astrologers").

They saw a "new Star" in the heavens, and they believed that the Star represented the birth of a new King. They believed that this Star was a "Sign" which was so significant that they had to put everything else aside and seek whatever, and to whomever, the Star was leading them.

They were obviously willing to pay the enormous expense, and to face any amount of danger they would undoubtedly encounter as they traveled through “fields and fountains, moor and mountains” for the journey that probably took them weeks or months.

But this is where this ancient Biblical Story intersects with our own present-day life stories, because all of us are on a Journey as well. Our journey is, literally, the journey of a lifetime! And on this journey through life, we are all looking for something; therefore, we are all “seekers”. Today would be a good time for all of us to stop and think about what is it that we’re seeking; perhaps more to the point, Who is it that we are seeking in our lives?

Oftentimes people use the beginning of a new year to make resolutions. But as People of Faith, I suggest that today’s Feast is an appropriate time to just simply renew our commitment to our Faith---to be faith-filled believers in the One Who has come to be God-with-us, and to be life-long “seekers” after the Truth of the One Who has come to save us. Today would also be a good day to ask ourselves what our ultimate Life goal is? Is it clear in our minds and hearts that our ultimate life goal is to get to Heaven and live with God for all eternity? If that’s our ultimate goal, all the other goals, values, priorities and resolutions that we make every day should be shaped by that ultimate goal. We don’t have to wander all over the countryside following some mysterious Star; all we have to do is follow Jesus, Who shows us the Way, teaches us the Truth, and has won for us the Gift of Life.

Dear Family of Faith, Christmas is not just about a Day, or even a brief two-and-a-half week Liturgical Season. Christmas teaches us that our God loves us so much that He sent His Son, Jesus, into the world to be “*God with us*” forever. Christmas means that Jesus came to show us---first-hand---the right Way to live. He came to reveal the Truth---God’s Truth---to the whole world so that we are kept from being deceived or led astray by other versions of the truth. These Wise Persons---Magi---Kings---are such great models for us as we continue on our Life Journey, and as we each determine what it is, and Who it is, that is most important in our lives.

In the Gospel Story, we heard that when the Star led them to the House where the Holy Family was living, they went in, and St. Matthew tells us: “*they saw the Child with Mary his mother. They prostrated themselves and did him homage.*” They did not just tip their hats or bow their heads. They flattened themselves out, in all their regal finery, in an act of homage that is clearly reserved for Someone Divine. They did that because, before they gave the Child their precious gifts, Jesus had given them an even more precious gift--- they were given the “eyes of faith” to recognize Who this Child really was through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. On this great Feast, Who do you see when you see this Baby?

And that leads to another very important question: Who do you “see” when you come forward to receive Holy Communion? If we truly look with the “eyes of faith”, we will see Who the Three Kings saw, which should lead us to spiritually prostrate ourselves before the One for Whom our Hearts should always be seeking; to know that it is truly Jesus, our Lord and Savior, Whom we receive in the Eucharist, for those who can be present; and, for those virtually present, the One for Whom you long.

In these very early days of 2021, we have no idea what this year holds. We pray for an end to this terrible pandemic, for peace in our world, and a return to basic civility and a sense of unity within our society. Epiphany means a “manifestation”, but it’s also a word that we use to explain a “brilliant insight” or that which brings us “Light”. Perhaps this Feast can be our own “Epiphany” to shake us out of our lethargy, or our sense of “status quo”, and allow us to welcome Jesus, the Light of the World, into our hearts so that we can live in His Light---to follow Jesus wherever He leads us in our lives. Perhaps this Feast can be the time for us to allow

Jesus to give us that brilliant insight to “see” one another, and the world in which we live, as God “sees” us----to see one another truly as sisters and brothers.

If these last 9 months have taught us anything it should be that there are no walls, no boundaries, no borders, no divisions, nothing that separates us from one another because all of us are truly “in this life” together. Each of us is a child of God, and Jesus has come to bring salvation to all of us. Why would we allow differences of opinion, or ethnic/racial backgrounds or other distinctions to separate or divide us, when they should enrich us and make us all better, and help us all be better prepared for what will come our way between now and next Christmas.

May we, like Isaiah in today’s First Reading, allow the Light of Jesus to “*shine upon us....and to dispel the darkness that covers the earth.*” May we allow the Joy of Christmas and the Glory of Easter to fill us always with that sense of “*mystery*” which St. Paul talked about in today’s Second Reading, and embrace this new year of 2021 as another opportunity to grow ever closer to God and to one another. And may we, like the “mysterious and wonder-filled Visitors” from the East in today’s Gospel teach us all how to live with our eyes seeking after the Star Who is Jesus, the Light of the World, the One Who enlightens our life-long Journey of Faith.

God bless you, now and always.