

A Sermon by Fr. Davenport
6 January 2008

Solemnity of the Epiphany

Isaiah 60:1-6,9

Ephesians 3:1-12

Matthew 2:1-12

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

I love living in a city. I prefer walking on concrete to grass and dirt. I prefer buildings to woods. I prefer car exhaust to gnats and bugs. I prefer man-made noises to cicadas. However, I may not always prefer city lights to starry skies. At night in the city, we're not much tempted to look up at the sky, but if you did, you can often make out the moon, maybe a star or two – not much else, certainly nothing approaching the dazzling, sparkling, glittering display of a cloudless night in remote mountains. A few times I've seen a night sky like what the magi would've seen, and it takes my breath away.

It makes perfect sense that people look up to the stars to know something of eternity. I get why the Greeks saw their gods in the night skies. Human beings have always found inspiration in the heavens and sense a connection to infinity, to timelessness, to the mystery of existence. I get why horoscopes and astrologers are so popular. I don't believe that human beings can read the stars and know the future, but I understand the instinct, why some people look there for guidance and to know the future.

Christians, of course, look up to Christ for guidance. We see our future in Christ and so have hope and know something of God's love for us, but we live at a time when more and more people in our culture are looking elsewhere. The number of Americans identifying as Christians has dropped significantly in recent years, from about 80% to about 70%, a drop that some studies attribute to be largely a reaction to the "overreaching aggressiveness of much of the religious right."¹

Recent data from an evangelical pollster showed that 40% of Americans between 16 and 29 are outside Christianity and that this 40% had a strongly negative perception of Christianity. 70% consider it 'insensitive to others,' 78% 'old-fashioned,' 85% 'hypocritical,' and 87% consider it 'judgmental.'² It's particularly noteworthy to us that these assessments come mostly from people who have attended church, even been part of Christian communities. They've seen how far short American Christianity falls from the gospel. They know that it's not delivering substance. Instead, an increasing number of people experience Jesus as a source of judgment and condemnation, instead of inspiration, growth, and love.

Rick Warren, the megachurch superstar, the author of the gazillion-selling *The Purpose Driven Life*, gets it too. His ministry increasingly has focused on social justice. He writes, "For some time now, the hands and feet of the body of Christ have been amputated, and we've been pretty much reduced

¹ Bill McKibben, 'Taking the Gospels Seriously,' *The New York Review*, January 17, 2008, p. 44.

² McKibben cites statistics from *unChristian* (by David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons), which uses research from the Barna Group.

to a big mouth. We talk far more than we do. It's time to reattach the limbs and let the church be the church in the twenty-first century."³

All of this does not mean the solution is for the Church to become more liberal. We don't have to shift political parties or anything like that. A spiritual home is neither left nor right. Rather, a spiritual home rises above our differences to unite us. A spiritual home connects us to a common purpose that is bigger, more important.

The story of the magi, the wise men, shows us what a Christian community, a parish family, a spiritual home aspires to be. To some extent, each of us recognizes our own story in the story of the magi. Searching for guidance, wanting to know the future, looking to connect with eternity, the magi followed their star and found Christ. In the same way, each of us have looked up, and our journeys have brought us closer to Christ. It's why we come to church.

The magi represent all of humanity. We don't know how many of them there were, but the three gifts hints that possibly there were three of them. As the narrative developed, the magi became known as kings, representatives of nations, fulfilling Isaiah's prophecy that "the nations would come to your light, and the kings to the brightness of your rising." (Isa 60:3) Probably in the ninth century, they received names: Melchior, an old white man with a long white beard; Gaspar, or Caspar, a younger, darker man; and Balthasar, a black man. Later still, some associated them with the three sons of Noah: Shem, Ham, Japheth – the three fathers of humanity after the flood, a renewed humanity.

They represent the catholic, the universal journey of humanity to Christ. Together they foreshadow how Jesus would re-define our understanding of community and our relationships. They foreshadow the Good Samaritan. A neighbor is no longer merely someone like us, but anyone and everyone, perhaps especially the stranger, the outcast, the person in need. All are welcome before Christ, and so we are to welcome everyone we meet as neighbor, even as brother or sister.

The magi presented gifts to Christ. It was an act of faith, giving themselves to Christ. In this act, we see what we are to be – as individuals, as a community. Each of the three gifts represents an aspect of a healthy life in Christ.

First, frankincense symbolizes prayer and worship. Each of us, day by day, makes a gift of ourselves to God in our prayer and worship. It is the well-spring of life, the foundation of our relationship with God, with one another, with ourselves. In an interview with David Frost, the great film director Orson Welles said,

I hate it when people pray on the screen. It's not because I hate praying, but whenever I see an actor fold his hands and look up in the spotlight, I'm lost. There's only one other thing in the movies I hate as much, and that's sex. You just can't get in bed or pray to God and convince me on the screen.⁴

³ McKibben quoting a Warren essay in *unChristian*.

⁴ Orson Welles (1915–1984), U.S. filmmaker, actor, producer. Interview in David Frost, "Can a Martian Survive by Pretending to be a Leading American Actor?", *The Americans*, (1970).

The screen can't show our intimacy with God, our mysterious connection to God. It's personal, individual. In our daily prayers, in our worship, we encounter God, communicate with God, experience God, and what authenticates this experience is how we live the rest of our lives, and in particular what we do with our gold.

Gold represents all that we've received, not only wealth, but all of the gifts God has given us – family and friends, health and pleasure, talents and abilities, privileges and advantages. Do we give them back to God? Do we use them to build his kingdom? Research suggests that a growing number of people, especially younger people, consider American Christianity as pandering, indulging our consumer instincts. When three-fourths of American Christians think “God helps those who help themselves” is in the Bible, we've a good clue why people think Christians are insensitive, judgmental hypocrites.

Do we take social justice seriously? Are we involved with the poor, the oppressed, the overlooked, the difficult? Do we try to love the unlovable? In other words, are we outward-looking? Upward-looking? Lord, when did we see thee hungry and fed thee, or a stranger and welcome thee, or naked and clothed thee, or sick or in prison and visited thee? Jesus said, “Whenever you did this for the least, you did it for me.” (Mt 25:38-41)

Seeing Jesus in other people brings us to the third gift: myrrh, which is a perfume. Myrrh is both something that attracts as well as representative of death. Christianity calls us to give our lives to God completely, and we do this by sacrificing, by dying to ourselves, by emptying ourselves for other people. It's how we build a relationship with God and also how we build friendships, not putting ourselves first. We can see myrrh as giving ourselves to each other in friendship. Christianity personalizes life, heals our disconnectedness and loneliness, fosters reconciliation.

Ronald Rolheiser puts it this way:

To pray and to do social justice [gifts one and two] is to be prophetic. But that's a lonely and hard business. Prophets are persecuted, are powerless and are rejected. Because of this, it is all too easy to get angry, to feel self-righteous, to fill with bitterness, to become selective in our prophecy and to hate the very people we are trying to save.

When this happens, gratitude and joy disappear from our lives and we are unable to live without the need to be angry. Invariably, then, both our prayer and social action become perverse.

...Only friendship can save us. Loving, challenging friends who can melt our bitterness and free us from the need to be angry are as critical within the spiritual life as are prayer and social justice. To neglect friendship is to court bitterness and perversion.⁵

Friendships just don't happen. They are not always easy relationships. They have to withstand disappointment and frustration and differences. We have to work at them, sacrifice for them. Friendships blossom through prayer, through conversation, and through work toward shared goals. Through friends, we vividly experience God, his guidance, his love, his hope.

⁵ Ronald Rolheiser, *Forgotten Among the Lilies*, Doubleday (2005), p. 34. Rolheiser's three pillars of spiritual life – prayer, social justice, and friendship – form the basis of this sermon.

Rolheiser says that we can evaluate our spiritual health by asking three questions:

- 1) Do I pray every day?
- 2) Am I involved with the poor?
- 3) Do I have the kinds of friendships in my life which move me beyond bitterness and anger?⁶

This is what we want in our lives, individually, and what we are building in our parish family. This is how we find Christ. These are the gifts that honor Christ. Over time as we offer these gifts, we find God transforming our lives. We look up and say, "I'm a different person than I was five years ago." Or three years ago. Even one year ago. We experience ourselves, ever so gradually, becoming what God wants us to be.

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

⁶ Rolheiser, p. 35.