

JANUARY 3RD, 2016: FEAST OF THE EPHIPHANY

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

In our reading of Scripture it's easy to forget that each of our writings was originally directed to a specific community at a specific time and place. Technically none of our sacred authors wrote anything for us. (Else they would have written in modern English.) That's why, among other things, to properly understand today's gospel pericope, we must understand the community for whom Matthew is writing. It's no accident that our well-known narrative of the magi is found only in Matthew.

The reason is simple: he's the only evangelist who writes for a Jewish/Christian church; the other three compose their gospels for Gentile Christians. Matthew's original readers could be compared to modern Seventh Day Adventists: Christians who believe they're still obligated to carry out many of the 613 Laws of Moses. For instance, they don't eat pork and still regard Saturday, not Sunday, as their weekday holy day. Matthew's community would have regarded themselves as Jews, but unlike the majority of their friends and relatives, Jews who bought into the reform Jesus of Nazareth taught and lived.

One of the most important messages Matthew directs to these Jewish Christians is that non-Jewish Christians can be just as good followers of Jesus as they are. As a matter of fact, the evangelist tells his readers, the first people to recognize the exceptionalism of the child Jesus were not only Gentiles, but Gentiles who were also devotees of astronomy, something totally forbidden for Jews to practice – under penalty of death. Though Herod, the Jew, finds out from his Scripture scholars the name of the town in which the new king of the Jews is to be born, only non-Jews actually travel down from Jerusalem to Bethlehem to check out what these biblical experts promised they would find.

We know from the classic prophets like Third-Isaiah, the author of today's first reading, that centuries before the birth of Jesus, Jews had to deal with the part non-Jews would play in the history of salvation. But in most cases, Yahweh was simply expected to use these Gentiles to support Jews in their faith. Either they would convert to Judaism – and therefore cease being non-Jews - or enrich Jews by "bearing gold and frankincense, and proclaiming the praises of Yahweh."

That's quite different from what Gentile/Christians did. Without converting to Judaism, they became part of Yahweh's new Chosen People, on an equal level with Jews. The disciple of Paul responsible for the letter to the Ephesians expresses this belief in black and white terms. ". . . The Gentiles are co-heirs, members of the same body, and co-partners in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel." In the eyes of God there's absolutely no difference between Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians. Matthew was convinced his community needed to hear this from various angles – even magi angles. Many in the evangelist's church still had to die to themselves in order to fully accept this truth.

Perhaps that's why the magi's third gift to Jesus is myrrh. We can understand why they offer this newborn king gold and frankincense. But what's with the myrrh?

My old Scripture professor Dr. Irvin Arkin, in treating this passage, frequently asked what we would think if we opened a birthday gift and found a bottle of embalming fluid! That no doubt would put a damper on the celebration. Yet Arkin hit the nail on the head. At the time of Jesus myrrh was frequently used to anoint dead bodies.

Matthew's telling us that dying is always part of our experience of the risen Jesus, especially when we're called upon to accept others as equal to ourselves – others whom we've traditionally looked upon as being inferior.

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JANUARY 10TH, 2016: BAPTISM OF JESUS
Isaiah 42:1-4, 6-7 Acts 10:34-38 Luke 3:15-16, 21-22

Our annual March 25th feast of the Annunciation always creates problems for teachers and students of Scripture. The celebration revolves around Gabriel's well-known encounter with Mary narrated in Luke 1. But as any critical reader of Scripture knows, that's only one of four gospel annunciations concerning Jesus of Nazareth. Totally independent of Mary's annunciation, Joseph has an angelic experience at the beginning of Matthew's gospel. And both Mark and Luke – in today's gospel pericope – also provide an annunciation to Jesus as part of his baptismal experience. (Of course, the evangelists also supply us with annunciations to Jesus' disciples both in their transfiguration narratives and in Matthew's baptismal passage. But we'll leave those aside for the time being.)

As I mentioned two weeks ago in my Holy Family Sunday commentary, biblical annunciations are literary devices created by our sacred authors to point out the meaning of the events they're narrating. They're included for the sake of the readers, not the biblical participants. Though they're important for helping us understand our biblical writers' beliefs and theologies, the vast majority of Scripture scholars don't take these passages literally.

Without annunciations we can presume that biblical personalities lived lives quite similar to our own, often asking why God placed them in specific situations, in relationships with particular people. It usually takes a lifetime to make sense out of a lifetime. Rarely are there shortcuts.

It would seem the historical Jesus originally conceived of himself simply as a disciple of John the Baptizer. Practically every source employed by our Christian sacred authors associate him with this prophetic individual. Notice what Peter tells Cornelius in our Acts passage. "You know . . . what has happened all over Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John preached" Yet once John was arrested and eventually martyred, Jesus had to change his plans. He not only takes over John's ministry, he becomes even greater than his mentor.

That's why Luke's John tells Jesus, "I need to be baptized by you, and yet you are coming to me." We presume no one around Jesus and John would have realized the former's superiority to the latter until after John's arrest and martyrdom, long after Jesus and John's original relationship was formed, eventually solidified by Jesus' death and resurrection. Luke obviously inserted late first century CE theology into a passage which narrates events which took place 40 or 50 years before.

In a parallel way, the call narratives of the classic Jewish prophets are always the last sections of the prophetic books to take form. Today's Deutero-Isaiah pericope is a classic example. Only toward the end of his ministry does this unnamed prophet begin to understand the uniqueness of his call. Though he's certain he's a prophet, it takes him a lifetime to understand how unlike other prophets he is. He doesn't tear into people like most of his prophetic predecessors. On the contrary, not only does he build up where others tear down, he eventually begins to understand that even non-Jews – the coastlands and the nations – will benefit from his ministry.

Is it possible that it also took time for the historical Jesus to discover his own uniqueness? After all, remember that the author of the letter to the Hebrews was convinced that he was a human being like all of us except in sin. I take for granted that means if we only discover who we are gradually, so did Jesus.

Strange things happen when we begin to understand annunciations as the literary devices our sacred authors intended them to be. We might actually be able to identify with certain individuals we'd never dared identify before – including Jesus of Nazareth.