

JANUARY 3RD, 2020: EPIPHANY OF THE LORD

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

“We Three Kings” certainly isn’t an appropriate hymn for the feast of the Epiphany. If Scripture scholars had their way every “kingly” crib statue would be ceremoniously smashed during today’s liturgy – immediately before the homily.

Why do we encourage such a violent ritual? Because the idea of royalty visiting Joseph and Mary’s Bethlehem home completely turns the evangelist’s message upside down.

Matthew’s well-known narrative commemorates a visit not of kings, but of despised people. The confusion happened when the original Greek text was transliterated into Latin; the word *magoi* became *magi*. The Greek *magoi* refers to sorcerers or magicians; the Latin *magi* signifies kings or high potentates.

Counter to us Latin-rite folk, Greek speaking Christians always kept the gospel’s original meaning. For instance, the famous mid-6th century Byzantine mosaic of the three Bethlehem visitors in the basilica of St. Apollinaris in Ravenna depicts the trio wearing magician outfits not royal robes.

Once we transform sorcerers into kings, Matthew’s theology goes down the biblical tube. The evangelist includes this narrative in his Jewish/Christian gospel to point out that the most unlikely people, using the most unlikely means, can often surface Jesus in their lives more quickly than likely people following likely means.

According to Exodus 22:17, sorcerers are to be killed on sight. Among other abominations, they follow stars and heavenly bodies to surface God’s will in their lives. Nothing could be further from biblical faith. (Though few have noticed, the 1940 Academy Award winning song - and Disney mainstay - *When You Wish Upon a Star* is roundly condemned in the Hebrew Scriptures.) Yet these pagan magicians eventually find Jesus while Herod, the Jew, refuses to even go down to Bethlehem. God obviously works in strange ways.

Though Third-Isaiah reflects, in our first reading, on non-Jews one day becoming Jews, he never goes as far as Paul’s conviction that Gentiles as Gentiles can become Christians. That unexpected discovery certainly makes the faith of Jesus an exciting experience for the Apostle. As he tells the Ephesians, “. . . Gentiles are coheirs, members of the same body, and co-partners in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.” In other words, “No one can predict how God’s going to work in our lives.”

That conviction was one of the original insights fueling the restoration of the catechumenate. Most of us remember the old days when possible new members simply went to a series of “convert classes.” After a couple months of having the priest fill their minds with Catholic teachings, the students took a simple true/false exam, easily passed, and were welcomed into the church either by baptism or profession of faith.

The restored catechumenate, on the other hand, begins not with the candidates receiving gobs of new information, but by encouraging them to reflect on what has already happened in their lives to bring them to this point. The presupposition is that God’s been working with and in them long before they and their sponsor walk into the parish hall. Following Matthew’s *magoi* theology, no two discovery stories are the same.

I once read an article explaining why John Henry Newman’s canonization was taking such a long time. One of the reasons for the delay came from the Vatican commission’s refusal to include anything in the process that had happened to Newman before his admission into the Catholic Church. Obviously the powers that be were convinced God began working in the life of the author of “Lead, Kindly Light” only 12 years after he penned those famous lyrics, in 1845 when he became a Catholic.

Perhaps we should create a Scripture service to be used immediately before the first catechumenate or canonization session begins, consisting just of today’s gospel reading.

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JANUARY 10TH, 2020: BAPTISM OF JESUS

Isaiah 42:1-4, 6-7 Acts 10:34-38 Mark 1:7-11

When most of us hear the word “annunciation,” we immediately think of Gabriel’s unique encounter with Mary in Luke 1. Those more familiar with Scripture would add Joseph’s angelic dream in Matthew 1. But only the most biblically sophisticated would turn to today’s gospel pericope describing Jesus’ baptism by John the Baptist.

Given our Christian background, we can see why Mary and Joseph need to be informed about their role in salvation history. But given that same Christian background, we can’t understand why Jesus needs an annunciation. He’s God from all eternity; the second person of the Trinity. If he doesn’t know what his role is in salvation history, we’re all in trouble.

Of course, it’s easy to forget that much of our personal Christian background came from catechisms, not Scripture. We learned about our faith in the context of a question/answer format; not from biblical narratives and letters. Coming from a Greek thinking mindset, we were expected to analyze people and situations around us, always trying to reach an either/or conclusion about them.

We ignore the fact that our sacred authors lived and expressed themselves in a Semitic, not a Greek thinking world. Instead of intellectually tearing people and situations apart with analysis, they synthesized, looking at them from every possible angle, continually surfacing different (sometimes contradictory) aspects. Like Fiddler on the Roof’s Tevye, their favorite line was, “But on the other hand . . .” When they finally finished thinking, they always couched their conclusions in a both/and, not an either/or statement. Unlike modern, Greek thinking Christians, they didn’t hesitate to give differing theological opinions about the same person or situation.

This is especially true when it comes to what the late Fr. Raymond Brown in his classic book, *The Birth of the Messiah*, referred to as the “Christological moment:” at what point in his existence does Jesus become God? The answer varies from Paul’s belief in Romans 1 that it happened at his resurrection to John’s conviction that he was God from all eternity.

In today’s Marcan pericope, the Christological moment either takes place at Jesus’ baptism, or the Father makes him aware of who he is at that event. (That could be why there’s no Infancy Narrative in Mark. The evangelist probably didn’t believe Jesus was God during that part of his existence.) Notice that, unlike the voice from heaven during Jesus’ transfiguration which announces, “This is my beloved Son. Listen to him!” the baptismal voice proclaims, “You are my beloved Son; with whom I am well pleased.” Here the heavenly voice is announcing something to Jesus, not to his disciples.

Considering the Baptizer’s baptism revolved around someone’s determination to give himself or herself completely to Yahweh, this would be a turning point in the Galilean carpenter’s life. And, according to Mark’s theology, it’s in his total giving of himself that Jesus both discovers who he is, and his role in God’s plan of salvation.

From Luke’s mention in Acts that Jesus’ public ministry began only after “the baptism that John preached,” we can be fairly certain that event historically triggered something in Jesus that wasn’t there before. Like Deutero-Isaiah in today’s first reading, he’s now determined to be Yahweh’s special servant, to bring God’s consoling word to all who will listen.

Some of us might still be wandering around, not quite certain what God has in mind for us. Perhaps we’ve yet to give ourselves over completely to the risen Jesus, present and working in our daily lives. The historical Jesus would be the first to tell us, “Let go! Take that step!” It’ll be interesting to reflect on what we discover about ourselves when we finally make that decision. Bet we surface lots of “both/ands.”