**Homily for the Epiphany of the Lord**

**January 3, 2021**

**St. Bavo Parish**

**Rev. Peter J. Pacini, C.S.C.**

*First Reading: Isaiah 60:1-6 (They shall come bearing gold and frankincense.)*

*Responsory: Psalm 72 (Lord, every nation on earth will adore you.)*

*Second Reading: Ephesians 3:2-3a, 5-6 (The Gentiles are coheirs of the promise in Christ Jesus.)*

*Gospel: Matthew 2:1-12 (The visit of the Magi.)*

Today is the great Feast of the Epiphany, when Christians everywhere update our manger scenes by adding a few exotic-looking characters from the East. We push a couple of shepherds out of the way, park a camel outside the stable, and make room for three Wise Men to huddle around the Christ child and open their coffers to present their precious gifts. Throughout the centuries, Christians have attempted to reconcile two contradictory accounts of Jesus’ birth by mashing them together into this one scene, which appears *nowhere* in Scripture. Luke’s account of Jesus lying in the manger makes no mention of Wise Men, and Matthew’s account of the Magi visiting the Christ child makes no mention of a manger, a stable, or shepherds. But, we manage to unite these disparate stories by ignoring most of Matthew’s details and imagining that the Magi just showed up at the stable shortly after the shepherds. For a Scripture scholar, this traditional manger scene is a travesty, because it muddles both of the messages that the Evangelists were trying to convey by their unique narratives. Yet, in the minds of believers, this conflicting imagery actually becomes *complementary*. Rather than becoming confused, we find ourselves arriving at a more *complete* understanding of Christ than either narrative provides on its own.

On the Feast of the Nativity, I chose to use the Midnight Mass readings at all three of our masses. So, everyone heard the familiar story about Jesus being born into poverty. As I explained then, Luke’s image, whether historically accurate or not, conveys a very important truth about Jesus and his mission as the Christ of God, namely, that Jesus came to save *all* people, from the least to the greatest. And, to do so, he entered deeply into the whole of human experience, from poverty and obscurity to fame and glory. When someone in our culture rises from humble beginnings to become rich and famous, but still empathizes with those at the bottom, we say that he “remembers where he came from.” Well, Jesus clearly remembered where he came from. Even as he was being acclaimed as a great healer, miracle worker, teacher, prophet and Messiah, he continued to identify with the poor and the afflicted – the ones whom others overlook and ignore. Jesus never forgot the “little people,” and he made sure that they knew his promise of salvation included them, too.

Matthew’s story of the Magi also is about the universality of salvation through Christ. But, the divisions that are bridged in his narrative are between nations and cultures, rather than between classes within the same society. Matthew is trying to show that the birth of Jesus was a turning point not just for Jews, who awaited the coming of their Messiah, but for *all* peoples. As St. Paul said to the Ephesians: “It has now been revealed… that the Gentiles are coheirs, members of the same body, and copartners in the promise in Christ Jesus.” In fact, history shows that many of Jesus’ own people never recognized him as their Savior, while people from all corners of the world *have* come to believe in him. Matthew portrays that truth by showing Jesus being born quietly at home in Bethlehem, with no one taking any notice of him until about two years later, when three strangers show up at the royal court in Jerusalem. They ask about a newborn King of the Jews, whose arrival they had deduced from carefully observing celestial signs. Naturally, King Herod and all of Jerusalem were “greatly troubled” by this news, because it meant that the Messiah had already come, that he was living among them, yet these pagans from a distant country heard about it before they did!

In reality, Jesus lived in obscurity for much longer than either of the infancy narratives suggests. All four gospels seem to agree that he was completely unknown outside his hometown of Nazareth until he began his public ministry at about age thirty. Only after Jesus began to work miracles and preach in synagogues did anyone suspect that he was more than just the son of a carpenter. But, astonishment at Jesus grew rapidly, as he demonstrated by many signs and wonders that he was the Messiah. These signs were the true “epiphanies,” the manifestations of Jesus’ divinity, which caused many to believe in him. So, the epiphany stories at the beginning of Matthew’s and Luke’s gospels are not attempting to describe what *actually* happened at the time of Jesus’ birth or shortly thereafter. Rather, they are showing what his birth *meant* to a world shrouded in darkness, awaiting a Savior. They express *our belief* that this child, born in obscurity, has become a light to all the nations and a beacon of hope for all peoples.

In the First Reading, we heard Isaiah prophesy that nations and kings would walk by the shining radiance of God’s people. He even spoke of foreigners offering symbolic gifts of gold and frankincense to the Jewish leader, who would be both a King and a High Priest for his people. But, the way that God’s plan unfolded was not exactly what Isaiah described. The Prophet thought that peoples from many nations would see the marvels that the Lord had done for his people, especially as he brought them back from exile, and they would come streaming to Jerusalem to do homage to the Savior who had accomplished such wondrous deeds. However, it’s not at all clear whether these foreigners would be able to share in the salvation of the Chosen People, unless perhaps, they converted to Judaism.

Matthew’s story of the Magi adopts some of Isaiah’s imagery, but his message goes well beyond what the Prophet had in mind. And, the key difference can be seen in the gifts of the Magi. The first two gifts, gold and frankincense, are the same ones that Isaiah mentioned, and they appear to have the same symbolic meaning. They are offered to Jesus to honor him as a King and High Priest, who will rule over and sanctify his people. However, the third gift, myrrh, gives new meaning to the other two, for it was used to prepare dead bodies for burial. Hence, the three gifts of the Magi, *taken together*, symbolize how Jesus assumed his royal power and offered the perfect sacrifice to his heavenly Father by *dying* on the cross. Hence, Matthew is showing us that Christ’s *death and resurrection*, not his birth, have brought salvation to all who believe in him, *whether Jew or Gentile*.

So, the next time you slip those Magi into your manger scene, remember that they represent the countless people from all nations, all cultures, and all generations who have “found” the *Risen Jesus* and the salvation that he offers to us all.