

HOMILY FOR THE FEAST OF THE EPIPHANY OF THE LORD
Sunday, 2 January 2021

- Fr. Jim Fredericks

Part One: the readings for the day
Part Two: reflection on the readings
Part Three: guidelines for *lectio divina*

PART ONE: READINGS FOR THE DAY
Lectionary: 20

Reading I Is 60:1-6

Rise up in splendor, Jerusalem! Your light has come,
the glory of the Lord shines upon you.
See, darkness covers the earth,
and thick clouds cover the peoples;
but upon you the LORD shines,
and over you appears his glory.
Nations shall walk by your light,
and kings by your shining radiance.
Raise your eyes and look about;
they all gather and come to you:
your sons come from afar,
and your daughters in the arms of their nurses.

Then you shall be radiant at what you see,
your heart shall throb and overflow,
for the riches of the sea shall be emptied out before you,
the wealth of nations shall be brought to you.
Caravans of camels shall fill you,
dromedaries from Midian and Ephah;
all from Sheba shall come
bearing gold and frankincense,
and proclaiming the praises of the LORD.

Responsorial Psalm Ps 72:1-2, 7-8, 10-11, 12-13.

R. (cf. 11) Lord, every nation on earth will adore you.
O God, with your judgment endow the king,
and with your justice, the king's son;
He shall govern your people with justice
and your afflicted ones with judgment.
R. Lord, every nation on earth will adore you.
Justice shall flower in his days,

and profound peace, till the moon be no more.
May he rule from sea to sea,
and from the River to the ends of the earth.
R. Lord, every nation on earth will adore you.
The kings of Tarshish and the Isles shall offer gifts;
the kings of Arabia and Seba shall bring tribute.
All kings shall pay him homage,
all nations shall serve him.
R. Lord, every nation on earth will adore you.
For he shall rescue the poor when he cries out,
and the afflicted when he has no one to help him.
He shall have pity for the lowly and the poor;
the lives of the poor he shall save.
R. Lord, every nation on earth will adore you.

Reading II Eph 3:2-3a, 5-6

Brothers and sisters:

You have heard of the stewardship of God's grace
that was given to me for your benefit,
namely, that the mystery was made known to me by revelation.
It was not made known to people in other generations
as it has now been revealed
to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit:
that the Gentiles are coheirs, members of the same body,
and copartners in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.

Alleluia Mt 2:2

R. Alleluia, alleluia.
We saw his star at its rising
and have come to do him homage.
R. Alleluia, alleluia.

Gospel Mt 2:1-12

When Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea,
in the days of King Herod,
behold, magi from the east arrived in Jerusalem, saying,
"Where is the newborn king of the Jews?
We saw his star at its rising
and have come to do him homage."
When King Herod heard this,
he was greatly troubled,
and all Jerusalem with him.
Assembling all the chief priests and the scribes of the people,
He inquired of them where the Christ was to be born.

They said to him, "In Bethlehem of Judea,
for thus it has been written through the prophet:
*And you, Bethlehem, land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;
since from you shall come a ruler,
who is to shepherd my people Israel.*"
Then Herod called the magi secretly
and ascertained from them the time of the star's appearance.
He sent them to Bethlehem and said,
"Go and search diligently for the child.
When you have found him, bring me word,
that I too may go and do him homage."
After their audience with the king they set out.
And behold, the star that they had seen at its rising preceded them,
until it came and stopped over the place where the child was.
They were overjoyed at seeing the star,
and on entering the house
they saw the child with Mary his mother.
They prostrated themselves and did him homage.
Then they opened their treasures
and offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.
And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod,
they departed for their country by another way.

PART TWO: HOMILY ON THE READINGS

Today is the feast of the Epiphany and I am thinking about pilgrimages.

Some of you have made pilgrimages to the basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe in Mexico. Some of you have hiked the Camino de Santiago in Spain. I'm sure some of you have been to visit the Santo Niño de Cebu, in the Philippines.

If you stop and think about it, Matthew is telling us the story of the very first Christian pilgrimage. Wise men from the east have made an arduous journey to pay homage to the newborn king of the Jews.

Matthew is certainly telling us a splendid story about the birth of the Messiah. There are mysterious visitors from the east. There is a sign in the heavens. There is treachery on the part of Herod (that will end in "the

death of the Holy Innocents"). There is even a warning delivered in a dream.

This story is about the birth of the Messiah. But since it is a story about a pilgrimage, Matthew's story is about the Church as well.

The magi have set off on their pilgrimage because they looked up into the heavens and wondered about the meaning of the star. Once they had discerned the truth of what they were seeing, the magi acted: they set out in search of the newborn king of the Jews.

I love the fact that the magi struggled to find their way on their pilgrimage. Once they get to Jerusalem, they don't know the rest of the way. They have to make inquiries.

"Where is the newborn king of the Jews?
We saw his star at its rising
and have come to do him homage."

Even after they are told that the king of the Jews is to be born in Bethlehem, they continue to look up into the heavens for guidance:

And behold, the star that they had seen at its rising preceded them, until it came and stopped over the place where the child was.

The first Christian pilgrimage did not take the magi down a well-marked path. They had to make decisions about the way forward to find their way to the Christ Child.

Their journey home was eventful as well. Herod had his own plans for the child and the magi must figure out how to get back home without being further entangled in his schemes.

And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed for their country by another way.

Here's my point: Matthew's story tells us a lot about the Church. At this time in its history, the Church needs to be more aware that it has always been a pilgrim. And like the first Christian pilgrimage, the path forward for us is not entirely clear; the journey is far from uneventful.

Above all else, like the magi of old, God has given us a star to follow as we make our way along our path.

There are quite a few people who don't like to think of the Church as a pilgrim. They tell us that the Church has no need to set off on journeys. The Church is an island of light in a sea of darkness. The Church's should be busy defending the truth it has been given. We have no need for a star.

I respectfully disagree. The Church, at its best at least, has always been a pilgrim. We are a people on the road and, like the magi of old, we have been given a star to follow. Our faith calls us to look into the heavens together and find the star that the Lord has given to us. Then we need to give ourselves to one another in loving service as we follow that star.

The way forward will not always be clear. Which star to follow will not always be easy to discern. We will not always agree about where the star is leading us. There has been and will be treachery along the way. We will have to ask for advice as well.

But most of all, like the magi, we need to be overjoyed when we see our star.

And behold, the star that they had seen at its rising preceded them, until it came and stopped over the place where the child was.

They were overjoyed at seeing the star,

Pope Francis is reminding us that we are a pilgrim Church. He is calling for the local churches around the world to hold synods. He wants us to discern the way forward. He wants us to recognize that we are "on the way together."

In ancient Greek, the word for "on the way together" is *syn-hodos*. We get the word "synod" from this. Pope Francis wants us to remember that we are a synodal Church: we are on the road together and we have been given a star to follow. This means that we must listen to one another. We must be humble enough to confess our sins to one another, recognize our mistakes and receive instruction from one another. We are not always going to agree about the way forward. But we must also recognize that standing still is not an option. Our star - the Holy Spirit - urges us on.

When the magi saw the Star of Bethlehem, they did not fully understand where it would lead them. And yet, they had the faith to set off in search of the Christ Child. *Syn-hodos* - they were on the road together, and that was enough for these wise men.

If we are to be a synodal Church, in a vital dialogue about the way forward, we need a spiritual life that is deep and disciplined. There is a paradox in this pilgrim spirituality. We need to have a sense that, even though we are not sure of the way, the Christ Child awaits us in Bethlehem. The paradox is that we are constantly discovering that God is with us every time we summon the faith to take a difficult step on the path.

Above all else, we must become very skilled in sharing our faith with one another. We need to be a sign in the heavens for one another - like the star that guided the magi.

In doing this, let the Church become a sign of hope for the world. All around the world, let them say of us what Matthew said of the magi:

They were overjoyed at seeing the star.

PART THREE: INSTRUCTIONS FOR *LECTIO DIVINA*

I suggest that you use the readings and my reflections as an opportunity for practicing *lectio divina* ("divine reading"). This is an ancient spiritual practice that

started with the great monks in the Syrian and Egyptian desert back in the early days of the Church. It is really quite simple.

Step one: calm your mind (my Buddhist friends describe the mind as “a mango-tree full of chattering monkeys”). I find that paying attention to your breath for a few minutes is a practical and effective way to do this.

Step two: read the readings slowly and attentively. Savor the words as if you were tasting a great Pinot Noir. Don’t rush. You are not looking for information or instructions. You are making friends with a sacred text which will bless you abundantly if you will only open your heart to it and let it speak to you. In *lectio divina*, we are not actually “reading” the Bible. Rather, we are “listening” to the Bible as the sacred words speak to us.

Step three: repeat step two.

Step four: read the reflection on the readings.

Step five: Ask yourself a few questions:

- What particular words in the readings call out to me most forcefully?
- What is going on in my life such that these words call to me so forthrightly?
- How am I being asked to change, both interiorly and exteriorly?
- In light of this *lectio divina*, how am I being invited to be of service to the world today?