

HOMILY FOR THE EPIPHANY OF THE LORD

Sunday, 3 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: A HOMILY ON THE READINGS

We have come to the feast of the Epiphany and I wish you all a happy NEW year.

I have written NEW in capital letters for a reason. I don't want any of you to have just "another year." I especially don't want you to have another year like 2020, for reasons that I'm sure you can figure out for yourselves.

No – I want us all to have a really NEW year.

This brings me to the Epiphany, the last part of the Christmas story. The birth of the Messiah, in the Gospel according to Matthew at least, doesn't include shepherds "keeping watch over their flocks at night (this is in Luke). Instead, Matthew tells us,

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."

We can't seem to decide how to imagine these exotic visitors. Matthew calls them *magi*. This means that they were priests from Persia, although we are not sure if this is what Matthew has in mind in calling them *magi*. They know about the Hebrew scriptures and the prophecies about the birth of the Jewish Messiah. Apparently, they practice astrology as well, for they have observed "his star at its rising."

For this reason, we sometimes refer to the *magi* as "the three wise men." (Although I don't know where we get the number three).

But if you're longing to drive out to Point Reyes to bring back some crab like I am, you should also take note of the fact that we sometimes call the *magi* "the three kings." (Point Reyes is really the *Punto de los Tres Reyes*. Maybe it was discovered on the Feast of the Epiphany).

We three kings of Orient are...

So, should we think of the *magi* as kings or as wise men?

There is a good reason to think of them as kings. They have brought gifts for the Christ child that only kings could afford: gold, frankincense and myrrh. Gold speaks for itself. Frankincense comes from the sap of a tree that grows in Yemen. Kings would burn this sap in temples to get on good terms with the gods. Myrrh was a perfumed oil used for various purposes. Like frankincense, only a king could afford it.

But there are also good reasons for us to think of the *magi* as wise men. And this brings us closer to why I am wishing you a truly NEW year, not just another year.

The *magi* are wise men because they observed the star. They were given the wisdom to look up into the heavens for a sign that God had not abandoned the world. And there, shining in the heavens for them, they saw the Messiah's star.

But more than this, we can think of the *magi* as wise men because after seeing their star, they had the courage to follow their star. They loaded up their camels and made their way across the cold and darkness of the desert to that barn in Bethlehem.

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.

Herein lies the wisdom of the *magi*. They were wise men because they were given a star and had the faith to follow it.

We have certainly all finished with 2020, but we have not entered 2021 unscathed. We all have different stories to tell – stories about businesses, finances and jobs or about sickness and separation. Some of us have done better than others. But none of us have come to the beginning of this new year unaffected by the trauma of 2020. Isolation and uncertainty are stressful, and the stress is taking its toll on us in different ways.

As we begin this NEW year, I recommend that we reflect on the *magi*. They were given a star to follow and they had the courage to load up their dromedaries and set off into the desert, making their way to the Christ child.

We have been given a star as well. Look up into the heavens and search for it. Or better: look at people wearing their masks and doing the best they can in this difficult time. I urge you to think of people who are doing the best they can in this difficult time as a star for you to follow.

And if you are looking up (or looking out) and can't seem to see your star, I have some demanding advice to give you.

If you can't find a star to follow, then become a star for someone else to follow.

Give it a try. I won't tell you that this is easy. But I will predict that, by becoming a star for someone else, your own star for you will appear in the sky above you. Most of the time, we are given the star and then we set off across the desert. Other times, we see nothing. We have to set off into the desert first, trusting that, out in the desert on the journey itself, the star will appear.

This is hard to do, but I recommend it as a spiritual practice.

In this NEW year, remember the *magi*. They very well might have been kings. After all, they brought kingly gifts to the little boy in that barn in Bethlehem.

But the *magi* were most certainly wise men. And we can be certain of this because they followed their 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?