

HOMILY FOR EPIPHANY  
Sunday, 7 January 2024

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 we celebrate the Epiphany of the Lord.

I want to reflect on the magi – the wise men that came from the east to Jerusalem in search of the King of the Jews. But, in doing this, I want to say something about our lives here at Saint Leo's as we begin the year of our Lord, 2024.

Luke tells a great story.

Wise men arrive in Jerusalem, unannounced. There will be a great deal of intrigue with Herod that won't end until the flight of the Holy Family into Egypt as refugees and the slaughter of the Holy Innocents in Bethlehem after the departure of the magi.

Why did the magi make this journey?

There is a hint about this in Luke's Gospel:

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."

I get the point: the magi observed a star in the heavens and then set out.

But I want to ask: what does it mean for us that they had the nerve to mount their camels and set off on the journey? Seeing the star is one thing. Setting off on the journey is something else.

I wonder if the magi were in despair when they looked up and saw the star that would lead them to Bethlehem.

The world, at times, sinks into despair. Certainly, this is what is happening around the world today.

In the Middle East, terrible crimes have been committed and are still being committed. On the news I saw a child running in a panic in a hospital in Gaza. The child was wailing hysterically, calling out for her father, and no one in the hospital had the heart to tell this little girl that her father was dead.

In different parts of the world today, the economy is failing to provide for the common good. More and more wealth is being concentrated into the hands of fewer and fewer people. This goes a long way in explaining why there are so many migrants on the road and why demagogues have taken over our politics.

We are beginning a new year and I want you to open your hearts to a teaching of the Church.

It's this: God never abandons us to our despair.

Today, the Maker of Heaven and of Earth is sending us a star and telling us to get on the road.

Let me tell you about Saint Augustine.

He lived in a time of despair too: the Roman Empire was falling down around him. Augustine died with the barbarians literally at his city's gate.

And this is what Saint Augustine taught his people:

Human beings were created so that there might be a beginning. For before this, there was no one who could do this.

*Initium ergo ut esset, creatus est homo,  
ante quem nullus fuit.*

This teaching goes to the heart of the Gospel. God realized that the world would sink into despair from time to time. And so, he created human beings in order that the journey of creation into the Mystery of God might begin once again.

And get this: Augustine says that, before there were human beings, there was no one in the world who could do this for God.

Augustine said this sixteen centuries ago, but he is speaking to us today.

There is a reason we were placed on this earth: We are called by God to rescue the world from its despair. God has set the world on a journey that is leading it back to its Creator. And when creation falls into despair, only human beings can begin the journey again.

This is why the magi were given their star: In the midst of the cold, dark winter of despair that had come over the world, the magi looked up, saw their star and then set out for Bethlehem. They were given their star so that the journey might have a new beginning.

And in the year of our Lord, 2024, I am here to say that we have been given a star for the same reason.

Listen to the poetry of the Prophet Isaiah...

See, darkness covers the earth,  
and thick clouds cover the peoples;  
but upon you the LORD shines,  
and over you appears his glory.

Today, as well, darkness covers the earth. And yet, upon us the LORD shines.

It's time to look up. There's a star above us. It's time to put our despair aside and start the journey again.

### 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?