

Feast of the Epiphany January 5, 2014

INTRODUCTION: Jerusalem was destroyed by the Babylonians 587 years before Christ and the Jews who were not killed by the Babylonians were taken to Babylon as exiles. Fifty years later, the Persians (people living in modern day Iran) conquered the Babylonians, and they allowed the Jews to return home. What the Jews returned to was still in shambles just as when it had been destroyed 50 years earlier. Rebuilding was extremely difficult. Today's prophet, writing about 500 years before Christ, tries to encourage the people and assure them Jerusalem would again be a great city. He sees Jerusalem becoming the center of spirituality and light for all the world. People would come from everywhere to visit Jerusalem and to be nourished by the spiritual light and life radiating from it. St. Matthew sees this vision fulfilled in the birth of Jesus and the coming of the magi. When you hear the last few lines of today's first reading you will understand why it was chosen for today's feast of the Epiphany.

HOMILY: Two weeks ago we heard St. Matthew's version of Jesus' birth - how St. Joseph was greatly troubled when it was discovered that Mary was going to have a child and he knew it wasn't his. An angel revealed to Joseph that the child was conceived in her through the Holy Spirit and he should not divorce Mary as he was planning on doing. And so Mary gave birth to her child in Bethlehem. In Matthew there is no mention of shepherds or choirs of angels. Matthew does tell us Jesus got some unusual visitors. The Greek word for these visitors is "magoi" which in its English form is "magi." Magi were sometimes magicians but apparently these magi were astrologers. Astrology was held in high regard in that culture. They were people who were viewed as being able to predict the future by studying the stars. Astrology originated in Babylon and most probably the magi were Babylonians or Persians. It was no easy trip they made as Babylon was about 1000 miles from Jerusalem and Persia was even further. It was pretty much taken for granted at that time that the birth of an important person would be marked by some kind of celestial event. The Jews were not the only people who looked forward to the rule of a great king who would bring peace to the world. The whole Mediterranean world at that time looked for such a leader, so one could say with certitude that the birth of a messiah would definitely be marked by some celestial sign.

The idea that the magi themselves were kings, that they were three in number, and that they traveled by camels (which they probably did in order to carry their luggage) were all ideas that arose later on in Christian literature. They are ideas not supported by today's gospel. It is interesting in that the gospel does not even tell us they were Gentiles, which they most likely were. As Gentiles they represent God revealing his Son to all the nations, while the Jewish people, ironically God's chosen people, received the news of the birth of a Messiah with indifference or even hostility. The Jewish indifference to the birth of Jesus is seen in that the Jewish leaders could tell the magi where the messiah was to be born without going to look for him themselves. The hostility that was shown was on the part of Herod who felt threatened by the birth of a king. I guess Herod thought he would live forever. The irony of it is that Herod did not know that the baby

that was born came to bring eternal life to all who would accept him and who would believe in him.

Matthew's story makes us ask ourselves how much effort are we willing to put into our journey to find Christ. I fear many Christians are like the Jews in Jerusalem, able to quote the Scriptures and having all the answers about our faith, maybe even having received all the sacraments, and feeling confident we have a ticket straight into heaven. But have we stopped in our journey to find Christ? Have we stopped seeking to offer him homage? Did you notice how often this phrase was used in today's gospel – after traveling 1000 miles through difficult terrain, the magi were intent of finding the Christ child so they could offer him homage and gifts.

Homage, according to the dictionary, means respect or honor given or shown, especially by action. Many believe that our custom of giving gifts at Christmas originated from the magi bringing gifts to Christ. But what can we give Christ? If we read the gospels, he will tell us what he wants, he wants our time on Sunday, he wants our love, and he wants us to love one another.

Finding Christ is an ongoing effort. We may think we've found him, and sometimes we really feel as if we have, then we realize we still have a long way to go. After 30 years of being a priest, I remember I was feeling pretty smug with myself and with my faith. At that time I took a trip to the Holy Land. While I was at the tomb of Lazarus, I discovered I was taking my relationship with Christ pretty much for granted. Standing in that empty tomb gave me an awesome awareness of who Jesus really is. I forgot he is more than just a friend I can run to when I need a favor. He is the origin of all life, he is the God who made the universe, he is the Lord who by a single word can make the dead come alive. He is worthy of all glory and honor (i.e., homage). The experience was so strong, I couldn't even talk about it for a number of years. Like John the Baptist once said about Jesus: "I did not know him." This revelation helped me move just a little further along in my journey to find Christ. And I realize I must still keep going forward. We will never be finished finding him until we find him in eternity. May this new year bring you a little further along the way to find our Lord and may his star continue to guide you. Amen.

Baptism of the Lord – A Cycle

January 12, 2014

INTRODUCTION: (*Isaiah 42,1-4.6-7; Acts 10,34-38; Matthew 3,13-17*) In today's first reading, the prophet is speaking to God's people in exile in Babylon, 500 years before Christ. In today's passage God introduces his servant to his people; however the servant is not named. God's servant will be a light to the nations, establish justice in the world and liberate captives, all done in a non-violent manner. God has put his spirit on his servant and it's obvious God is quite pleased with his servant. Scholars debate who the Jews might have thought God was speaking of when they heard this passage; but

no one, until after Jesus death and resurrection, ever suspected this passage referred to the Messiah. At Jesus' baptism at the beginning of his public ministry, God introduces Jesus to the world as more than his servant, as his beloved son with whom he is well pleased.

HOMILY: I suspect practically everyone has their Christmas decorations packed away by now, and many of you are no doubt wondering why our church still looks the way it does, with flowers, wreaths and the Christmas crib. There is a very simple explanation. While our society begins to celebrate Christmas weeks in advance, the Church liturgy doesn't begin to celebrate Christmas until Christmas Eve, and it ends the celebration of Jesus' birth with the feast of the Baptism of our Lord. Actually the Baptism of our Lord is part of the feast of the Epiphany. The word Epiphany means God is revealing or showing to all people his Son who was born for us. There are many events in the life of Jesus that reveal or show the Son of God to us, but the initial events that reveal Jesus to us are these three. First, the coming of the magi who were led to Jesus by a star. The second is Jesus' baptism when the Holy Spirit came down upon Jesus and God's voice was heard proclaiming Jesus as God's beloved Son. The third event is when Jesus changed water into wine at the wedding feast at Cana, which John tells us is the first of Jesus' miracles. Today the focus is on the second of these events, Jesus' Baptism.

We think it was strange that Jesus was baptized because John the Baptist's baptism was one of repentance. The purpose of Christian baptism also has as one of its purposes to take away sin. Jesus had no sins to repent of, and so it's difficult to understand why he asked John to baptize him. Even John the Baptist thought it was strange that Jesus would want to be baptized. John didn't want to do it. He told Jesus that Jesus should be baptizing him. But Jesus insisted. Jesus said "it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness." Jesus' statement meant that Jesus accepting the baptism of John was in accord with God's will, and Jesus was ready to do perfectly whatever God would ask of him. I could spend the next 45 minutes speculating about why Jesus felt that God the Father wanted him to come to John for baptism. But after all the speculation, we still wouldn't have an answer.

The baptism of Jesus, as recorded in the gospel, was primarily to show that Jesus is God's beloved Son, that he was ever faithful to the will of his Father, that he was anointed by the Holy Spirit as Messiah and he was guided by the Spirit in the course of his ministry. "A new age under the power of God has begun." (*The Collegeville Bible Commentary*, pg 867)

Although Jesus was without sin and was God's Son from all eternity, Jesus' baptism does teach us some things about our own baptism. When we are baptized, we are fundamentally changed; God sends his Spirit into our hearts and we become, at that moment, God's sons and daughters. The Church reminds us of our baptism. For instance, at the Easter vigil by the Easter candle that is always lit during Easter and by the use of holy water. These reminders of baptism help make us aware of who we have become through God's grace, that we are God's sons and daughters and that we are to

live always faithful to God's will. Remind yourself of that the next time you bless yourself with holy water and thank God for the gift of his grace that came to us through the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Second Sunday in Ordinary Time – A Cycle

January 19, 2014

INTRODUCTION: (*Is 49,3.5-6; 1 Cor. 1,1-3; Jn. 1,29-34*) Last week, in our first reading, we heard about God's servant who would bring justice and light to the world. We hear again about God's servant, who would lead the people of Israel back to God and bring God's salvation to the ends of the earth. These four passages about God's servant were written over 500 years before Christ. Scholars do not know who the prophet had in mind when the passages were written, but with the advantage of hindsight we see these passages beautifully describe God's perfect servant, Jesus Christ.

HOMILY: I want to talk about sheep today, but before I do I would like to mention something I found very interesting. The Jews at the time of Jesus despised shepherds but loved sheep. Shepherds were at the bottom of the social ladder. They had a dirty job and they were viewed as a bunch of crooks, stealing from one another or from the owners of the sheep. Ironically, they loved sheep.

Sheep were a big part of the economy. They provided wool for clothing and food for the table, especially on festive occasions. They were offered to God in sacrifice. They are important in today's liturgy because John the Baptist refers to Jesus as the Lamb of God in today's gospel. It's an image that probably doesn't mean much to most people today. Because it is an image the Church uses in its prayers right before Communion, I want to help you understand the symbolism a little better. There are three important references to sheep in the Scriptures that I would like to focus on.

The first reference is the Paschal Lamb. When God was about to set the Hebrews free from their slavery in Egypt about 1300 years before Christ, Moses instructed the people to protect themselves from the last plague, the Angel of Death, that would descend upon the land of Egypt killing every firstborn male in the land. The Hebrews, however, were to take the blood of the lamb and sprinkle it on the doorpost of their houses and the Angel of Death would pass over those homes. Thus the Hebrews were saved by the blood of a lamb. They were then to roast the lamb and eat it as a family, a meal that became an annual commemoration of God setting his people free. This became "the great national feast of Israel which celebrated its establishment as the people of God." (*Dictionary of the Bible, John L. McKenzie, S.J. pg 644*)

The second reference is to the Suffering Servant of Isaiah. The four sections of Isaiah that describe the Suffering Servant are known as the Servant Songs because of their poetic style. We heard today that the servant had an awesome responsibility, to "bring [God's] salvation to the ends of the earth." (*Is. 49,6*) This would be accomplished

through the servant's suffering and rejection. The prophet quotes God's people as saying: "While we thought of him as stricken, as one smitten by God and afflicted (for his own sins, yet), he was pierced for our offenses, crushed for our sins...By his stripes we were healed. (*Is. 53,4-5*) Those who attend services on Good Friday might recognize those lines. The prophet goes on to say (and this is the important line for our purposes): "Like a lamb led to the slaughter or a sheep before the shearers, he was silent and opened not his mouth. Through his suffering, my servant will justify many, and their guilt he shall bear." (*Is 53,7.11*) Five hundred years before Christ, these lines were written. They were never thought of as applying to the Messiah for the people imagined the Messiah to be a king or a priest who would be a glorious leader and a powerful, victorious figure – not a suffering one. It was only after Jesus death and resurrection that these servant songs were seen to apply to Jesus the Messiah. But the Baptist, the greatest among the prophets, may have been given this insight that Jesus was the Servant of the Lord when he referred to Jesus as the Lamb of God. Some scholars would argue about this and say that the Baptism referred to Jesus as the "Servant of God" rather than the "Lamb of God" based on the fact that the Aramaic word for lamb is also the word for servant (*talya*). They suggest that Lamb of God is really a mistranslation - an idea that takes us into a whole different direction.

Our third reference from the Book of Revelation clearly combines the suffering servant with the symbol of the lamb when Jesus is described in this quote from Rev. 5,6: "Then I saw standing in the midst of the throne and the four living creatures and the elders a Lamb that seemed to have been slain. He had seven horns and seven eyes..." The seven horns and seven eyes indicate he had the fullness of power and knowledge. Lamb is the main title for Christ in Revelations. All that I have talked about comes together here with the image of the lamb who was slain who is now reigning on high. He is the lamb who died for our sins and whose blood saved us from eternal death. Toward the end of the Book of Revelation, the author tells us the wedding day of the Lamb has come (i.e., a symbol of God's reign when God will wipe every tear from our eyes, and there shall be no more death or mourning, wailing or pain). Then the angel said to the author of the Book: "write this: Blessed are those who have been called to the wedding feast of the Lamb." (*Rev. 19,9*) We say something similar right before Communion, that we are called to the supper of the Lamb. I regret that the liturgy uses the word "supper" instead of "wedding feast." "Supper" sounds so mundane. A wedding feast is a grand event. If Jesus worked his first miracle at a wedding feast of changing water into wine just to keep the party going, you might imagine that when God would throw a wedding feast for his Son, the feasting would go on forever. The Eucharist we celebrate is food for our journey and prepares us for this event. Amen.

Third Sunday in Ordinary Time – A Cycle

January 26, 2014

INTRODUCTION: (*Isaiah 8,23-9,3; I Corinthians 1,10-13.17; Matthew 4,12-23*) Galilee is located about 75 miles north of Jerusalem. With cars and expressways, that's not

very far at all. Since most people traveled on foot at the time of Jesus, it took a few days to make a 75-mile trip. Consequently, Galilee was often forgotten or looked down upon by the religious leaders in Jerusalem. Seven hundred years before Christ, the Assyrians conquered Galilee. Those Jews they didn't kill were sent into exile. The Assyrians did this to all nations they conquered, thus preventing conquered nations from regrouping and rebelling against them. The Assyrians moved a lot of pagans into Galilee to replace the Jews they exiled. In Jesus' time, seven hundred years later, there were still a lot of pagans living there as well as Jews who had moved back, so the population was pretty well mixed.

The prophet Isaiah, who was living in Jerusalem at the time the Assyrians conquered Galilee, foresaw good things for that area in spite of all the devastation the Galileans suffered. Isaiah said a great light would shine upon Galilee that would bring them abundant joy. If our first reading from Isaiah sounds familiar, it's probably because we just heard it a month ago. It was part of our first reading on Christmas. St. Matthew, in today's gospel, tells us Jesus' ministry in Galilee was the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy. It would have been normal for a religious teacher like Jesus to do his preaching and teaching mainly in Jerusalem. (Joachim Jeremias pg 242) Jesus, however, chose to begin his ministry in Galilee. In these readings Galilee is called by the names of two of the tribes of Israel that originally settled there: Zebulun and Naphtali.

HOMILY: O'Brian was a painter, and often his bid was the lowest whenever he bid a job. That's because he thinned down his paint by putting turpentine in it. It just so happened the Church needed to be painted and O'Brian bid on the job and got it. So he got to work. After about a week of painting, there was a terrible thunderstorm and the rain came down in buckets. The paint on the church started to wash off. O'Brian was really distraught. He asked God "why?" "Why is this happening to me? What did I do?" God said this is your punishment for cheating the church. O'Brian asked God "How can I make up for what I've done?" God said: "Repaint, repaint and thin no more." Kind of a groaner, but maybe it will help you remember the message of John the Baptist and of Jesus calling people to repentance and to sin no more.

Jesus came to announce the coming of God's kingdom. John the Baptism preceded him in preparing for the kingdom. They both had the same message initially. Those who wanted to be part of God's kingdom had to change their ways (that's what "repent" means) and live a life of holiness, that is, turn their back on sin. The similarity of their message, along with other indicators, lead many scholars to conclude that Jesus worked with John the Baptism for a period of time. When John was thrown in jail because he criticized the local power, Herod Antipas, son of Herod the Great and tetrarch of Galilee, Jesus was on his own. Matthew tells us he moved on to Capernaum, a town of about 15,000 inhabitants, a place much larger than Nazareth where he grew up. Capernaum was a commercial center on a main trade route along the sea of Galilee. Naturally fishing was a local business. One could easily suspect that Jesus not only settled in Capernaum because it was a larger town, but that he also

moved there to get away from his relatives and neighbors living in Nazareth. They were not very good to him. According to St. Luke's gospel, they tried to kill him.

An important word in today's gospel is the word "preach." As the gospel begins we hear: "From that time on, he began to preach: 'Repent for the Kingdom of heaven is at hand'." We come across the word again (translated as "proclaim") at the end of the gospel where Matthew tells us, "He went around all of Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom, and curing every disease and illness among the people." I stress the importance of this word (in Greek it is *kērússō*) because it means the announcement of important news by means of a herald. The one proclaiming the message would be, for example, a delegate of the king or a magistrate. And this herald was a highly important person. If anyone dared to offend or harm the messenger, it would be treated as if such behavior were directed to the king or magistrate himself (or herself if it were a powerful woman such as Cleopatra). Jesus came representing the greatest power in all of creation, God himself.

Since we are using Matthew's gospel all this year, I might point out to you that Matthew almost always uses the phrase "kingdom of heaven" rather than "kingdom of God." It's just out of respect for the word "God." (God is not God's name; remember God gave his name to Moses. The word "God" is what God is, not who God is.) However, as we keep hearing passages from Matthew's gospel, you will notice Matthew is very careful not to use the word "God" with only three or four exceptions - a practice we might learn from, especially when we are tempted to use it profanely.

What else can we learn from today's gospel? First of all, did you notice the immediate response of the apostles? They dropped everything to join Jesus when he called. Do we ever sense Jesus calling us to stand up for our faith, witness to our faith, live our faith more seriously. How do we respond? Like the apostles? Or is our response more like: "I'll get around to it next week"? Where do we place Jesus in our list of priorities? If Jesus is the herald of the great God proclaiming the kingdom of heaven, shouldn't we listen with great attention to what he has to say?

Following today's gospel, Jesus is now prepared to proclaim his first major teaching. This lengthy instruction in Matthew's gospel is called the Sermon on the Mount. It begins with the Beatitudes which we would have heard next week – but which we won't hear, because next Sunday is the feast of the Presentation in the Temple which outranks the Sunday readings. So, until next week, let me close with a verse from psalm 95: "if today you hear his voice, harden not your hearts." Amen.