

Feast of the Epiphany **January 6, 2013**

INTRODUCTION: *Isaiah 60, 1-6; Ephesians 3, 2-3a; Matthew 2, 1-12.* 587 years before Christ, Jerusalem was destroyed by the Babylonians (modern day Iraq) and most of the Jews who lived in and around Jerusalem were taken to Babylon as exiles and slaves. Fifty years later, the Persians (people living in modern day Iran) conquered the Babylonians, and they allowed the Jews to return home. I can't possibly imagine the difficulties and stresses the Jewish people were under as they tried to rebuild their homes, their Temple, their farms after the Babylonians destroyed everything 50 years earlier. The prophet in today's first reading tries to encourage God's people and assure them Jerusalem would again be a great city. He sees Jerusalem becoming a light for the whole world. His vision is that the Jews would no longer be the only people to learn about God and to worship God, but people would come from all nations to visit Jerusalem to be nourished by God's word and to worship at God's holy temple. St. Matthew sees the vision of the prophet fulfilled in the birth of Jesus and the visit of the magi.

HOMILY: According to George Burns the secret of a good sermon is to have a good beginning and a good ending and to have the two as close together as possible. I do not promise that from now on my every sermon will fit this pattern, but I know you have been patiently listening to a lot of sermons in the past two weeks. Today I'll do my best to give you a good sermon according to George Burns.

On Christmas we celebrated the Son of God taking on our human nature (a mystery called the Incarnation). Today the heavenly bodies themselves proclaim to all the world that God is living among us in human form. The word Epiphany comes from the Greek and means an appearance, a manifestation or a showing forth. The Greek Church celebrates Epiphany in a big way – it is their celebration of Christmas. The Roman Church (that is us), after celebrating Jesus' birth, tends to focus primarily on the coming of the magi after Christ is born. The news is getting out.

In antiquity it was a general belief that the stars and planets in some significant way announced the birth of a great person. Magi is the plural form for the Greek word Magus. A magus was a Persian or Babylonian wise man and priest who was expert in astrology, interpretation of dreams and who possessed various other magical or occult powers. The Scriptures do not tell us how many magi came, but they traveled some distance, somewhere between 500 and 1000 miles. Travel was dangerous in those days and not very comfortable. There is a delightful mini-opera (in English) named *Amahl and the Night Visitors*. The opera takes as its theme three magi (in the opera they are kings) losing their way in their search for Christ and stopping at the home of a poor mother and child to spend the night. I'm sure you found it delightful if you have ever had a chance to hear it or see it.

Reflecting on the theme of the magi's long journey from Iraq or Iran to Jerusalem, I thought of how we all are on a journey, whether we are aware of it or not, as we pass

through this life. On this journey we encounter pleasant or unpleasant events and surprises. Sometimes it moves along happily, sometimes it gets very difficult, sometimes we meet wonderful people along the way and sometimes not, but day by day we keep moving. Whether that journey leads to Christ or not depends on us. As the magi found the Scriptures helpful in their travels, so those same Scriptures can and will guide us. As I thought of the magi coming from a far distance to find Christ, I thought many people who come here are like the magi, for they come long distances: Centerville, Delhi, Colerain Township, West Chester, Fairfield, Loveland, Lawrenceberg IN, Ft. Thomas, KY., etc. I am grateful so many people come from so many places. If we didn't have you, we would be out of business. I hope and pray that St. Boniface will always be a place where you can find Christ.

Just a few days ago we started a new year. One author described the beginning of a new year as a book with 365 blank pages. Each day we fill one page with the story of our journey. I pray that when all 365 pages are filled, your story will be a good one, and it will be if you keep moving in the direction of Christ. Amen.

Baptism of the Lord – C Cycle January 13, 2013

INTRODUCTION (*Isaiah 42, 1-4, 6-7; Acts 10, 34-38; Luke 3, 15-16, 21-22*)

Surely many people must have pleased God greatly during the Old Testament period, people such as Abraham, Moses, the prophets. In the book of the prophet Isaiah, God speaks of someone as his servant with whom he is especially pleased. In these four lengthy passages, known as the servant songs, the servant is not identified. Perhaps the passages refer to someone who was alive at the time of the prophet, but what is amazing is that although they were written 500 years before Jesus was born, they describe Jesus perfectly. Today's first reading is part of the first servant song. It has been chosen as today's first reading because we hear echoes of it at Jesus' baptism as God says to Jesus: "with you I am well pleased."

HOMILY: Although Dec. 26 is the end of the Christmas season for many people, the Church's liturgical year extends the Christmas season to the Baptism of our Lord. Thus our crib is still in church. What does the Baptism of our Lord have to do with the Christmas season? The Baptism of our Lord is part of the Epiphany theme. Remember "epiphany" means appearance or manifestation. Last Sunday we celebrated God manifesting his Son to all nations by the visit of the magi. Today we celebrate God manifesting his Son to us as he begins his public ministry.

People often wonder why Jesus chose to be baptized. He was without sin and John the Baptist was baptizing people for the remission of sin. Even John found it strange that Jesus came to him for baptism. St. Matthew's gospel tells us John tried to prevent his asking for baptism by saying to him: "I need to be baptized by you, and yet you are coming to me?" (Mt. 3, 14) Yet Jesus insisted on it.

Scholars two are puzzled by Jesus' baptism. Many have speculated that Jesus was initially a disciple of John. His baptism may have indicated his early association with John and Jesus seeing his baptism as a preparation for his own ministry. That is one possible explanation. Another that is offered by scholars is that Jesus may have received John's baptism as a form of support and acceptance of John's mission of calling for repentance in preparation for the coming messiah. When many people think of John's baptism, they think of it as essentially the same as our sacrament of baptism, but it is not. The two are miles apart. We just heard in today's gospel John say, "I baptize with water...he is the one who will baptize with the holy Spirit."

Jesus did not need to be baptized. He was as holy as he could be. He was God's Son from all eternity and when he was conceived it was by the holy Spirit. For us to be filled with God's life, we need to receive baptism. When we are conceived, we are given a share in the life of our father and mother. To share God's life, we must be born again or born from above. The Greek word (ἀνωθεν) can mean again or from above. Jesus tells the Pharisee Nicodemus in the gospel: "no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit." (Jn. 3,5) When we are baptized, we are at that moment made truly God's children and the Spirit fills us. When we are baptized, God whispers to each of us "you are my beloved child."

When we are conceived, we begin life as a human person; when we are baptized, we begin life as a child of God. We have a lot of growing to do in both arenas. As we grow, we learn who our parents are, how to love them and receive their love, how to communicate with them, how to obey them. As God's child, we learn that God is our Father, how to love God and how to receive God's love, how to communicate with God and how to obey God.

The child has its parents and the Church to guide him or her in learning how to live life in this world and how to prepare for life in the next. Baptism is thus not a one-time event that we can go through and then forget about. It sets our life on a path of holiness for this world and for eternity.

Jesus was baptized with the baptism of John at the beginning of his public ministry of preaching, healing and casting out demons. We are baptized with the baptism of Jesus to begin to live our life in the Spirit of Christ. May the events at Jesus' baptism inspire us to know who we are and to keep us growing in the right direction. Amen.

Second Sunday of Ordinary Time – C cycle January 20, 2013

INTRODUCTION: (*Isaiah 62, 1-5; I Corinthians 12, 4-11; John 2, 1-11*) For almost fifty years, the Jews were captives and exiles in Babylon (modern day Iraq). Then the Persians (modern day Iran) conquered the Babylonians, and they allowed God's people to return home. The Persians were even willing to give them financial aid to rebuild their Temple, their homes, their cities and their farms. The prophet in today's first reading announces this wonderful event that God would bring his people back home.

During their exile, God had not forgotten his people and would take his people back to himself as his bride. The image of Israel as God's spouse is an important biblical image, found in several of the prophets, and is the best symbol from our human experience that can be used to describe the affection God has for us. This wedding image prepares the way for the gospel account of Jesus' first miracle at the wedding feast of Cana.

HOMILY: A man was just getting ready to step into the shower and his wife came into the bathroom to get her medicine. The husband asked her this off the wall question (maybe he was expecting some kind of a compliment as an answer): "what do you think the neighbors would say if I cut the grass dressed like this?" Giving him a casual glance, she replied, "They'd say I married you for your money." (*Reader's Digest: Laughter, the Best Medicine, pg 178*) Our gospel reading is about marriage and Jesus' first miracle at a wedding celebration (which I understand went on for several days in the culture of that time – not surprisingly the wine ran out.)

I want to connect this Sunday's gospel with two feasts we've just celebrated. Two weeks ago we celebrated the feast of the Epiphany. As I said the last two Sundays, the word Epiphany means appearance or manifestation. On Epiphany we reflected on God's manifesting his Son to all the nations through the coming of the Magi. Last Sunday, the feast of the Baptism of our Lord, God manifested his Son at Jesus' baptism when the Holy Spirit descended on Jesus and a voice came from the heavens that said: "You are my beloved Son, with you I am well pleased." Today's miracle of changing water into wine fits into this theme. Jesus is manifest as a wonder worker in his first miracle, and his disciples began to believe in him. This is one theme we can see in today's gospel. When one reads from John's gospel, however, there are various levels of meaning we can find in one passage.

I would like to reflect on another theme that is central to today's gospel: the idea of "change." Jesus' life was all about change. He came to change the world, to teach us how to do a better job of loving God and loving one another. He changed people who were sick and made them well. He changed sinners by forgiving them and telling them to live good lives (sin no more). He changed people who were possessed and set them free from the demons that controlled them. In his first miracle, he changed water into wine and changed what would have been a failed celebration into a great party.

He continues to call us to change. When he began to preach, he called people to change their lives, to get their priorities straight, and to put God first. He continues to work miracles of change in the special meal he gave us the night before he died. He took bread and turned it into his body and changed wine into his blood.

When Jesus called people to change their lives, it didn't always happen. We have a free will to accept what God has spoken to us or to reject it. Every other time Jesus told something to change, however, it always happened, whether he was changing a blind person into a person with sight, or a lame person into one who was ambulatory, or whether it was a storm on the sea that he told to calm down. Why do many people then

not believe in the Eucharist? Because he said at the Last Supper as he handed the apostles bread: “this is my body,” and likewise with the cup of wine: “this is my blood.” We can believe that the bread and wine were truly changed when he said those sacred words. We just can’t see it. I might add, we can’t always believe what we see, but we can always believe what Jesus said.

This changed bread and wine that becomes Jesus’ body and blood will change us. We will become more like him and grow closer to him. Our faith is not a static thing, it is dynamic because the power of Jesus is at work. Later on in John’s gospel he tells us, “I came that they may have life, and have it to the full.” I think this is one of the most powerful lines in the gospel. If we believe in him and if we let him, Jesus will keep changing us until we come to the fullness of life. Amen.

**Third Sunday – Ordinary Time – C cycle
January 27, 2013**

INTRODUCTION – Almost 540 years before Christ the Persians (Iran) conquered Babylon (in Iraq) and the Persians allowed the Jewish exiles living in Babylon to return to Israel. However, after having lived in Babylon for fifty years, most of the Jews had made a home for themselves there and were quite comfortable where they were. Even a hundred years after being allowed to go back to Israel, those who returned were still struggling in their efforts to rebuild their farms and their cities. Today’s first reading brings us back to that period, 100 years after the return and restoration had begun. The Persians were still in control of the Middle East. Today’s first reading is from one of the historical books in the Old Testament, the book of Nehemiah. Nehemiah had an important position as a servant to the Persian king, Artaxerxes I. Aware of the difficulties the Jews were confronted with, the king allowed Nehemiah to return to Israel to help his people rebuild, and appointed Nehemiah to be governor in Israel. In an effort to rebuild the Jewish nation, Nehemiah focused his efforts of rebuilding on what was most important, and that was their faith in God. In today’s first reading Nehemiah called for a general assembly of the people and he delegated the priest-scribe, Ezra, to read God’s word to them. Being a scribe, Ezra would have been one of the few people who know how to read and write. Being a priest, he could publicly expound on the meaning of the Scriptures. So Ezra read God’s word to the people and interpreted it for them. The reading was most probably from the first five books of the Bible. Notice how the people actively responded to God’s word. Jesus reads God’s word to his former neighbors in Nazareth in today’s gospel, but he gets mixed results.

HOMILY – These first verses of Luke’s gospel (ch. 1) are important for he describes why he was writing it and the care he had taken to compose it. These four verses are followed immediately by a section called the Infancy Narrative, where Luke tells the story of the annunciation and birth of John the Baptist and of Jesus. The section of the Infancy Narratives is read during Advent and Christmas. It is followed by the Baptism of

Jesus and Jesus' temptation in the wilderness. The next part of Luke's gospel brings us today's gospel in Chapter 4, the beginning of Jesus' public ministry.

Luke introduces Jesus' public ministry with a general statement that Jesus was going around Galilee teaching and his teaching was creating a reputation for Jesus. Luke doesn't mention the miracles Jesus had been working or what Jesus had been teaching. Instead he brings us to the visit Jesus made to Nazareth, the place where he grew up and lived for most of his life, until he was about 30 years old. This is an important episode in Luke's gospel because it foreshadows the entire ministry of Jesus that Luke is going to tell us about: that is, Jesus' early ministry that led first to his popularity and then eventually to his rejection.

Did you notice these few words where Luke tells us Jesus went into the Synagogue on the Sabbath, "as was his custom." Jesus was still going to church faithfully. It's not always so important for people today, even those who are Catholics. We've all seen these bumper stickers that say, "what would Jesus do?" That statement kind of bugs me because Jesus would often say or do surprising things. But one thing St. Luke wants us to know is that Jesus faithfully practiced his religion. St. Luke told us this same thing earlier in his gospel when he told us about the Holy Family going up to the Temple when Jesus was twelve years old. Luke said: "now every year his parents went to Jerusalem for the festival of the Passover." Passover was a week-long celebration with two or three days travel time going and two or three days travel time getting home. Worship was a high priority in the life of Jesus.

In a typical synagogue liturgy, the people would have heard a passage from the Pentateuch (the first five books of the bible) and a passage from the prophets with a reflection after each. Jesus was invited to do the second reading, which he apparently chose himself, from Isaiah. The passage in Isaiah describes God restoring his people to Israel after the Babylonian exile. God's word is always sacred, but on this occasion Jesus is telling his listeners that what he is about to say is an especially sacred moment, "today this Scripture passage is fulfilled in your hearing." In other words, what Isaiah said 500 years earlier would find an even greater fulfillment in what Jesus had to say. Through Jesus, God is bringing salvation to God's people, especially the poor, prisoners (most likely those who couldn't pay off their debts), the blind and the downtrodden. Scripture scholars all point out that the Isaiah passage adds that God would take vengeance on the enemies of his people; i.e., the Gentiles. In reading from Isaiah, Jesus omitted that phrase. It was salvation he had come to announce, not vengeance, and it would be a salvation offered to the entire world, to all nations.

Jesus saw himself as being guided by the Spirit (the Spirit of the Lord is upon me). Now in the Spirit he proclaims the good news of God's saving love. He was an immediate success. For a moment I'm going to get ahead of myself and refer to next Sunday's gospel. Apparently his hearers, who knew him as a child and later as a simple craftsman, wanted some kind of a sign from him for he said to them: you are probably saying to yourselves: "do here in your own country what we have heard you have been doing in Capernaum." Then they turned on him and were ready to kill him.

He walked away from them, however, for his good work had to go on until it was the right moment. When that moment arrived, he would give up his life rather than discontinue his ministry and he would rise again and continue his work through the Spirit and through the Church. We are invited to be part of that sacred moment each time we are at Mass. Amen.