

Mary Mother of God – B Cycle

January 1, 2015

A man, driving a little too fast, was stopped by a police officer around 2:00 a.m. and he was asked where he was going at that time of night. He answered “I’m on my way to a lecture about the sins of alcohol abuse, as well as smoking and staying out late.” “Really?” the officer replied. And who’s giving that lecture at this time of night, your pastor?” “No, my wife,” the man replied. (The Joyful Noiseletter, Jan-Feb, 2015, pg 2) That story applies to no one here, of course.

In the year 153 BC the Roman Senate chose January 1 as the start of a new year. It was the day on which the Roman councils took office. It is said the people celebrated with “boisterous joy, superstitious practices and gross orgies.” The early Christians made January 1 a day of penance as a reaction against the excesses of the pagans.

Today is a holy day, however, not because it’s the first day of a new year - although I couldn’t think of a finer way to begin a new year than with special prayers, especially the Eucharist. We all know how desperate our world is in need of prayer. Today is a holy day for several reasons. It’s just by coincidence that today is the octave of Christmas. The liturgy solemnly celebrates major feasts like Christmas and Easter for eight days, until the octave (the Latin word for eight), and the octave itself is always an important day. Also, today is the feast of Mary, the Mother of God, a title that was officially decreed in the Council of Ephesus in 431. This title gives special honor to Mary, but it also confirms what we believe about Jesus, that Jesus has two natures but is one person and Mary is his mother. This feast of Mary is the oldest feast of Mary in the Church’s liturgical calendar. Many will remember this day as the feast of the circumcision of Jesus and the feast of the holy name of Jesus.

In our culture we get excited about new things. It may be a new car, a new i-phone, a new friend, a new fashion, a new movie, a new year, and with the word new attached to something, we tend to assume it’s going to be better than the old. We tend not to think of new things or events that are unpleasant: like new taxes, new contagious disease, new aches and pains, new problems at work, new global confrontations, etc. So in our culture’s enthusiasm for what is new, we focus on what wonderful things the new year can bring to us, which it may do. But, at this time we also need to reflect on the good things in our life that are part of our past that we bring with us into the new year, such things as our values, our relationships and especially our relationship with God.

Before I conclude, I have two more things to say. First of all someone sent me a quotation that was attributed to Mother Teresa. This quote may inspire us to make the most of the days ahead:

Life is an opportunity, benefit from it.

Life is beauty, admire it.

Life is a dream, realize it.

Life is a challenge, meet it.

Life is a duty, complete it.

Life is a game, play it.
Life is a promise, fulfill it.
Life is sorrow, overcome it.
Life is a song, sing it.
Life is a struggle, accept it.
Life is a tragedy, confront it.
Life is an adventure, dare it.
Life is luck, make it.
Life is life, fight for it.

My second point speaks of prayer. We need God's grace and help every day. If we didn't think we needed it, we wouldn't be here. And here, as in many other instances, we can look to Mary as an inspiration and a guide. St. Luke tells us, as he has told us in other places in his gospel, that Mary pondered in her heart the things God was doing in her life along with Joseph and Jesus. This pondering or reflection was prayer. There is only one way to get closer to God, which is what we all want, and that is we need to spend time reflecting on what God has done or is doing in us, taking time to think about God, spending time with him, and communicating with him, which we are about to do right now.

Feast of the Epiphany

January 4, 2015

INTRODUCTION: Six centuries before Christ, Babylon was a great empire. The city of Babylon was located on the Euphrates, just about 100 miles south of modern day Baghdad. In 587 BC the Babylonians conquered Israel and marched the Jews who survived the conquest off to Babylon as slaves. The Jews have suffered in numerous ways throughout history. This exile was unquestionably one of the worst events they ever had to suffer. But God would not let them be annihilated. In spite of their unfaithfulness to God, they were still his chosen people. So fifty years later, the Persians (people living in modern day Iran) conquered the Babylonians, and they allowed the Jews to return home. The Jews found their city and their homeland still in shambles. Rebuilding was extremely difficult. Today's prophet, whom we hear in our first reading, 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 the whole world. The prophet foretells that 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. Through Jesus, the message of God's love and salvation will radiate to all the world.

HOMILY: We all love to hear the story of the magi and to sing the familiar Christmas hymns that remind us of the story. When we hear about the magi, we can't help wondering who they were, whether they ever came into contact with Jesus later on, and why the other gospel writers didn't mention them. That must have been a big deal when they visited Jesus and Mary; why is it only Matthew tells us about it? For lack of more information with a few more details, and for lack of any reference to it in other New

Testament literature, many scholars question whether this is a real historical event. From what I have been reading, I am convinced it really happened. Here's why: Every part of the story is historically probable. For example, 1) there was at that time, even among the Romans, the expectation that there would arise a semi-divine hero-ruler. The Roman author Virgil writes about such expectations. The emperor Caesar Augustus was viewed by many as this hero-ruler who brought peace throughout the empire. Nero too was a candidate for this divine status. 2) Astrologers and magi as a professional class are frequently mentioned in the literature of the times. Even though astrology was forbidden in the Old Testament, Judaism was deeply affected by the phenomenon, especially during the couple of centuries right before Christ. 3) In the Book of Numbers, the fourth book of the Bible, there is quoted a prophecy by a pagan prophet named Balaam that goes back about 1200 years before Christ. Balaam (also called a magi in later writings) predicted that "a star shall come forth out of Jacob, and a scepter shall arise out of Israel." (Jacob and Israel are the same person). Thus it would have been expected by the Jewish people that the birth of an important person, such as a king or a great leader, would be marked by some stellar occurrence. Historically, there is nothing in the least improbable about the magi traveling from Babylon to any location in the Middle East. Magi, because of their respected standing, would find a welcome anywhere, from royal courts to market places. The image of Herod in the gospel as paranoid and shamelessly cruel, killing all the newborn males in Bethlehem, is a historically accurate image of the kind of man he was. I personally see no reason to doubt the historicity of Matthew's story about the magi and I find arguments against its historicity as unconvincing.

I want to mention four points that are important for us to take away from the account of the magi. This event connects Jesus with Moses and thus pictures Jesus as a new leader of God's people. How does he make a connection with Moses you might ask? Remember how the pharaoh at the time of Moses ordered all newborn males to be killed for fear that the Israelites would eventually be able to overpower the Egyptians if the Israelites had enough men to fight. Many infants were killed under pharaoh, but Moses was saved from death and was pre-ordained by God to lead God's people to the Promised Land. Jesus too was saved from death by the flight of the Holy Family into Egypt, thus getting away from Herod, and he came to us in order to lead us to the Promised Land of heaven.

Another thing we can see in the story is that Matthew gives us a hint about Jesus' future suffering and death in that people were out to kill Jesus from the time he came into our world. The forces of evil could not wait to get their hands on him.

The magi would have been gentiles and so Matthew is revealing to us the universality of the gospel; all people are invited to come to know him and worship him so he can lead them to eternal salvation. The invitation for all people to find Christ's light is repeated in other places in Matthew's gospel, especially at the end Right before his ascension, Jesus tells his apostles to "go out and make disciples of all nations baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit."

Finally, I think Matthew is telling all of us how to approach Jesus. We are to continue to search for him until we have found him and to pay him homage as the magi did. We are not to treat Jesus with indifference like the Jews, who had answers as to how he could be found, but were not interested enough to go to him.

We come to him today bringing our gifts, our time, our treasure, our love, our devotion. We know through faith, the Scriptures and the sacraments we have found him, and yet knowing we are still on a journey to get to know him better and to love him more, and we still have some distance to travel. That's why we're here today. Amen.

Baptism of the Lord – B Cycle January 11, 2015

HOMILY: I wonder how many were surprised to see the Christmas decorations still up in Church. Well, liturgically we are still in the Christmas/Epiphany season. But it all ends this weekend. So, enjoy the flowers and the crib which you won't see again until next year around this time.

Let me say a word about the meaning of Epiphany, so you can see how the feast of Jesus' baptism fits into the theme of Epiphany. The word epiphany means an appearance, a revelation or a manifestation of something, especially something glorious or wonderful. We celebrated Epiphany last Sunday by hearing how the magi, who represented the Gentile world, found the Christ child. Today's feast is also part of Epiphany, in that, at Jesus' baptism, God reveals Jesus as his beloved Son.

We could actually stretch the theme of Epiphany to almost everything in the gospels because whatever Jesus did, he was revealing himself as God's Son - whether it was changing water into wine, casting out demons, forgiving sins, walking on water, calming a storm, feeding a multitude with a few loaves of bread, teaching God's law, healing the sick or raising the dead. John the Baptist said, "One mightier than I is coming after me." Thinking of all these things Jesus did tells us just how mighty Jesus is.

We rightly wonder why Jesus asked John the Baptist to baptize him. Jesus was so far superior to John (or for that matter, to anyone who ever lived). John acknowledged this in saying he wasn't worthy to untie Jesus' sandals. So why did Jesus ask for John's baptism, especially since John's baptism was a baptism of repentance? Jesus had no sins; he did not need to repent. I have managed to come up three possible answers as to why Jesus was baptized by John. It is possible that Jesus was baptized for all three of these reasons combined. First of all, Jesus' baptism demonstrated his solidarity with us in his human nature. In other words, just as we are, he was fully human in every way possible with the exception of sin. Another reason for Jesus' baptism by John suggests that Jesus was showing his support for the work of John the Baptist and perhaps also sharing in that work as he began his ministry. It is likely from what St. John's gospel tells us (Jn. 3,22) that Jesus started off as one of the disciples of the Baptist and so his baptism by John would have officially incorporated him into the ministry of John. A third possible reason for Jesus' baptism could be that God the Father directly inspired Jesus

to be baptized so that God could express his delight in his Son: “you are” or “this is my beloved Son in whom I have taken delight.”

As we know, John’s baptism was not the sacrament of baptism which all of us have received. John said, “I have baptized you with water; he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.” John’s baptism symbolized a spiritual cleansing and purification; the sacrament of baptism really produces a cleansing from all sin and it grants us the gift of God’s grace and life.

I think it is good to occasionally reflect on the theme of baptism because it is the sacrament through which our sharing in Christ’s life begins. One wise teacher said if you don’t celebrate an event, you forget it. We always celebrate our birthdays – we don’t forget that day. But I would bet only a handful of people here, if that many, know the day of their baptism – yet that was the day on which we were reborn as God’s children. That was the day we could legitimately say to God: “Our Father...” That was the day that set a direction for our lives, to follow Christ’s way. That was the day that gave us the hope to be able to enjoy eternal life with God.

One of the special reasons for the Eucharist is to feed God’s life in us. Just as we need to eat to keep alive, so the life of God in us needs to be nourished, and what better nourishment could it receive than to listen to God’s Word and receive Christ’s body and blood.

John the Baptist said Jesus would baptize with the Holy Spirit. May that Spirit, given to us at our baptism, continue to move us in the right direction until we enter into the fullness of eternal life in God’s kingdom. Amen