

Feast of the Epiphany

January 8, 2006

INTRODUCTION: (Isaiah 60,1-6; Mt. 2,1-12) God's people were conquered and enslaved by the Babylonians in 587 BC. Fifty years later the Persians conquered the Babylonians and they allowed the Jews to return home. As our first reading begins, we hear the prophet enthusiastically proclaim this return: "Rise up in splendor, Jerusalem! Your light has come..." The prophet, however, sees in this event something much grander than the Jews' return from captivity. He sees Jerusalem becoming the center of spirituality and light for all the world. This passage begins to see its fulfillment in Jesus' death and resurrection in Jerusalem. From there his light spreads out to all the world. Unfortunately, not all people choose to follow this light, but at the end of time, those who have followed Christ's light will enter into the new and eternal Jerusalem so beautifully described in the book of Revelation.

HOMILY: I have a postcard from one of my vacations in Florida. It is a picture of the ocean with sand dunes, sea gulls, waves breaking on the beach, sea oats, etc. I pull it out and look at it when I'm feeling especially stressed. The picture reminds me of peaceful times I've had and restful vacations I can still look forward to. As you think of that image, keep in mind that it is a picture of one tiny portion of an immense body of water.

Now I want to use this as an example of an experience of God. I'm sure we've all had many of them. Perhaps in prayer, perhaps at Mass or in reading the Scriptures, perhaps in nature, perhaps in childbirth, perhaps in a loving and kind person, perhaps even in suffering. These experiences are moments to treasure. They could be called "epiphanies" for us for the word "epiphany" means God manifesting himself to us. Like the ocean God is vast, eternal, all powerful, all wise, all loving, greater than the universe. Those little epiphanies any of us may have had are just one very tiny experience of the infinite God.

Today we hear about the epiphany of three magi. This word magi comes from the original Greek text which calls them "magoi." Most likely they were from Persia or Babylon, and were priests of the Zoroastrian religion, known for their wisdom and their ability to interpret dreams and astrological phenomena. The gospels do not tell us how many there were. The idea of their being three of them comes from the three gifts they offered. The idea that they were kings did not originate until the third century, primarily inspired by Psalm 72 in which we prayed: "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..." King Herod obviously was not one of those kings who would pay Jesus homage.

Nature and Scripture led them to the infant Jesus. But in finding him they evidently knew they had found something far greater than just another child. The magi disappear from the Scriptures and from history, but the revelation of God's Son to us, in other words, Epiphany, is not finished with their disappearance. There was his baptism in the Jordan and Jesus' first miracle at the wedding feast of Cana, for example, which were at one time celebrated as part of this feast. All of Jesus' miracles were manifestations of his divine power, including and especially the resurrection.

Epiphanies are all around us if we are alert to them. When we have experiences of God's love and presence, personal epiphanies, they convince us there is a God. But too many people do not move any further in their knowledge and experience of God. They are content with their own personal epiphany and they miss the spiritual growth that comes from diligently searching further for him. There is no spiritual growth for them. Let us return to the analogy of sitting on the beach in Florida. It's enjoyable to sit there and watch the waves, but takes no effort on our part. To really appreciate the ocean we have to know what many other people have learned in their own travels. The ocean is as much off the coast of Maine as off the coast of South Africa. If we want to know God, we need more than just a couple of experiences of God's love and presence. This is why we need religion and we need the Church. People say they don't need organized religion. They don't realize how practical and helpful it truly is. By limiting our knowledge of the ocean to one tiny location we'll never get anywhere else or be very safe if we try. If we are to grow and mature in our relationship with God, we need information, especially maps, from others if we want to go somewhere further. We need the experience and guidance of other spiritual persons who can teach us what we do not yet know.

Epiphanies are wonderful. We should take and treasure all those that come our way. But they are meant to be helps along the journey we are all called to make to come to know and to possess the greatest treasure life can offer us in this world or the next, Jesus Christ, whom we can never get enough of. Amen.

Second Sunday Ordinary Time January 15, 2006

(I Sam. 3,3b-10.19; Jn. 1,35-42) Once while I was at another parish I went to visit a lady in the hospital. She was the mother of a large number of children (more than ten), several of them still in grade school. In our visit she disclosed to me that she thought she had a vocation to be a nun. It was both humorous and sad, sad that she was so seriously detached from real life and humorous because with all those children underfoot, I could see why she wanted to get away from it all.

My point is that not every time we think we're getting a call from God is it really God calling us. Often when he really does call us, his call is not so easy to discern, or if we discern where it's coming from, we're not so quick to follow. For example, Moses was in no hurry to take on the job God was asking him to do, even though the message came with unmistakable clarity. Samuel, on the other hand, kept hearing God call, but didn't know it was God. It was his mentor, the high priest, Eli, who helped him know God's voice. When I felt God calling me to be a priest, I was excited about the idea until I reached puberty. Then I was hoping the idea would go away, but God kept calling like he did with Samuel. The call to the apostles seems to have taken place over the course of time, as they found themselves attracted by Jesus' powerful personality. We see in today's gospel that God's call does not always come out of the heavens but from another human being. The call to Andrew and an unnamed apostle (probably John) came from John the Baptist. Peter's call started with Andrew. It took a while after meeting Jesus before they gave up their lucrative business in order to be Jesus' disciple or as that word

means, Jesus' student.

When God's calls, we seldom know what we are getting ourselves into if we follow that call. Samuel didn't know that he would become a leader for God's people, that he would be a prophet and priest, that he would lead the Israelites into battle, and that he would raise up and depose kings. Mary, the mother of Jesus, didn't know what she was in for when she said "yes" to God. Nor did the apostles know that they would have to give up more than their fishing business, and that following Jesus would cost them their lives. Mother Teresa felt called to be a nun and started her vocation in the classroom. After almost 20 years of teaching she received what she described as a "call within the call" when she felt called to serve the poorest of the poor and start a new religious order. Martin Luther King could not have had any idea when he was in the seminary and getting "C's" in public speaking that he would be threatened daily, that he would be imprisoned for standing up for justice, that he would be facing angry crowds with equanimity and prayer for his persecutors, that he would one day be leading 200,000 people to the nation's capital to dramatize that all of America's citizens are endowed with certain unalienable rights, among which are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. Nor did he know that an assassin's bullet would end his life at age 39. If I had known when I entered the seminary some of the difficulties I would have to deal with as a priest, I would have said, "God, I can't do that. Find someone else." I'm glad I didn't know, I'm glad God was with me during hard times, and I'm glad I followed his call.

God's call sometimes disrupts our comfortable lives. But if God wants us he'll keep calling, like he did Samuel, as long as there's a chance we might respond. Sometimes we need help in knowing what God's saying, sometimes we need to be pointed in the right direction, sometimes we need confirmation from others. For example, when I went to the seminary, the rector and staff didn't assume that I really had a calling. We had to go through nine years of schooling and a lot of scrutiny before ordination. When the lady in the hospital with all the kids told me she felt called to be a nun, I couldn't support her. Instead I reminded her that her real vocation was to take care of her children.

I think it's extremely important to notice that Samuel was already in God's presence at the place where the Arc of the Covenant was being kept, and it was in the quiet of the night he heard the Lord. Almost every time I have heard the Lord speaking to me, it was when I was praying, reading the Scriptures or meditating.

Our environment calls to us from so many directions: TV, radio, e-mail, cell phones, beepers, billboards, etc., etc. A lot of times God gets put on hold so we can listen to a call from somewhere else. If we want to hear the Lord, we have to put all other voices on hold so God can get through. The only way we can do that is to set time aside. I have a phrase I use for myself all the time regarding prayer: "if you don't schedule it in, you schedule it out." We have to make time for the Lord if we're really going to hear him, and if we don't, we won't. Amen.

Third Sunday Ordinary Time January 22, 2006

INTRODUCTION: (Jonah 3,1-5.10; Mk. 1,14-20) Whenever we think of Jonah we think of his being swallowed whole by a great fish (the Bible makes no mention of a whale). The story of how he was swallowed by a fish is a long one, but basically he was trying to escape from the mission God gave him to preach repentance to the Assyrians. You need to know that the Assyrians were an especially warlike, aggressive, merciless people who lived on the Tigris River, 250 miles north of Baghdad. The Assyrians had already destroyed most of Israel by the time Jonah was written, so you can imagine there was deep hatred on the part of the Jews for the Assyrians. Jonah was three days in the belly of the fish before he was spit out on the shore of Assyria. Having learned he couldn't run away from God, Jonah decided he had better do what God wanted. The story about Jonah that we hear in our first reading today is more amazing than the part of the story about the fish. Without miracles or spectacular signs, Jonah preached a one line, unenthusiastic warning to the people of Nineveh and in one day converted the entire city of Nineveh. To get an idea of how astonishing this would be, think of an unknown individual showing up in Baghdad today and in one day every person, including all the terrorists, repenting and converting to Christianity. Would that be something or what!!! Today's reading shows God is not interested in punishing people but in giving all people, even the bad guys, a chance to reform. The passage sets the theme for the gospel when Jesus began his public ministry by preaching repentance. We know from real life experience and from the experience Jesus and the Apostles had, calling people to change their lives is not as easy as the story of Jonah makes it appear to be.

HOMILY: This week the mayor of New Orleans, acting like an Old Testament prophet, said (and I quote): "Surely God is mad at America. He sent us hurricane after hurricane after hurricane, and it's destroyed and put stress on this country." He added: "... surely he (God) is upset at black America also." Whenever something bad happens many people, like a knee jerk reaction, like to say "God must be punishing us." If the mayor of New Orleans had received a true anointing to be God's prophet, he would have warned people ahead of time and not just after the fact. The picture of God that the mayor of New Orleans paints, as an angry God punishing us because we've been bad, is not the picture of the God I know. Even God in the Old Testament often pictured as a God of wrath, is interested in saving people, not in destroying them; for example, in our first reading God sent Jonah to warn the cruel and warlike people of Nineveh so they would not be destroyed. Why are there hurricanes and natural disasters? I think it's just part of living on a planet that is constantly adjusting to natural forces. And maybe we are making things worse by the way we abuse our environment. However, there are times when bad things do happen because we do not do what God wants. We have a God who wants only good things for us and for that reason he tells us how we should live in order to guide us to what is best for us. And when we ignore him, we only cause problems for ourselves.

This is why God sent his Son to us, to teach us and guide us. "The time has come," he said as he began his public ministry. "The Kingdom of God is near. Turn away from your sins and believe in this good news." As we heard in today's gospel, Jesus needed help to announce this good news so he started choosing people who would help him.

Jesus said "I came that they may have life and may have it to the full." Jesus' teachings are good news. Sometimes, though, it doesn't feel that way. Forgiving people who have hurt us, loving our enemies, getting up on Sunday morning when we're tired, keeping the commandments, giving some of our hard earned money to others; sometimes it doesn't feel like good news. That's why he said, "believe in this good news," because we don't always feel it.

Turn away from sin is part of his message. "Turn away from sin" is the translation of a word from the Greek: μετάνοια which means a change of mind. Generally it is translated repentance or conversion. Jesus is telling us if we're going to start believing in what he tells us we have to change our mind, to stop thinking and believing and doing what we used to.

Of course the reason we are here is because we do believe in Christ. But unless there's a Mother Theresa among us, I suspect there is room for improvement in most of us. Jesus' call to conversion is sort of like New Year's resolutions. We make New Year's resolutions because we realize we can do better, we can be better, we have more potential than we are using.

Until we hopefully reach heaven where we will be perfect, there'll always be room for improvement, always be some areas of our lives where the gospel of Jesus has not yet penetrated. Would that conversion were as easy as the book of Jonah pictures it. If it were, we wouldn't have to be reminded of it so often. Amen.

Fourth Sunday Ordinary Time January 29, 2006

INTRODUCTION: (Deut 18, 15-20; I Cor. 7, 32-35; Mark 1, 21-28)

I would like to begin by saying something about our second reading. It needs a special explanation. We have to understand when we hear Paul that he was thinking Jesus was going to return soon, that "time is short" and "the world as we know it is passing away." From this perspective, he favors a celibate life style. As a celibate himself he sees its advantages, but he admits not everyone is called to that kind of life. I think he overemphasizes the advantages of celibacy. He argues that married people do not have as much commitment to the Lord as those who are celibate, which may or may not be true. For a marriage to work, one of the things married couples need is a strong commitment to the Lord. And I can only partly agree with Paul when he suggests celibacy leaves a person free of anxiety. Maybe not being married saves a priest from certain forms of anxiety, but there are enough other anxieties connected with celibacy and the priesthood.

Now about today's first reading: Moses led God's people from slavery in Egypt. Moses remained with God's people in the desert for a generation before they were ready to enter the Promised Land. Moses himself knew he would die before the people crossed the Jordan to enter the land. In today's first reading Moses is speaking to God's people shortly before he dies. He assures them God would not leave them without direction or leadership. God would send them another prophet like himself who would speak God's word to them. This reading

prepares us for the gospel where Jesus speaks God's word with power and authority.

HOMILY: St. Mark's gospel is the shortest of the gospels and St. Mark doesn't spend any time with preliminaries. He opens his gospel with a few words about John the Baptist, then he tells us briefly about Jesus' baptism and his fasting and temptation in the desert. Last week we heard about Jesus beginning to gather his apostles and today we hear Jesus is already busy teaching and healing. And we're only at verse 21 in Mark's first chapter. St. Mark even skips past whatever it was Jesus was preaching about to get right to where the action is. Jesus comes out on the offensive, attacking the powers of evil. Notice it was on the Sabbath, the day the Jews celebrated God delivering his people from slavery. So it's appropriate that on this particular Sabbath, the man in the gospel was set free from slavery to the devil.

I have prayed many times over people who felt the devil had some power over them. I've never had such a dramatic experience as St. Mark describes here (people convulsing, crying out, sometimes falling down). I have read about people who have. The movie *The Exorcist*, which many people may have seen, was based on a true story of an exorcism. It's interesting how popular angels are right now and how unpopular it is to believe in the devil. It's especially interesting that so many people have this attitude when there is so much evil in the world around us. Personally I believe in good angels, but I find it much easier to believe in the bad ones. I think there's so much more evidence of their existence. Our ignoring the presence of the devil gives the devil greater freedom to do his or her thing. The smartest strategy a devil can use is to convince us that he or she is not around. St. Peter tells us "your enemy, the devil, roams around like a roaring lion, looking for someone to devour. Be firm in your faith and resist him." (I Pet.5, 8-9) Although some instances of what was considered demon possession at the time of Jesus may have been psychological or physical (such as epilepsy), the gospels do take the devil seriously and Jesus did too. When I am asked to pray over someone who thinks they are under demonic power, I always try to rule out psychological problems. If I think it is warranted, I do suggest a psychologist or psychiatrist for them to see, but at times I have felt there was an evil power at work in their lives that went beyond psychology.

Notice the devil recognized Jesus immediately as the Son of God: "the Holy One of God." Devils may not be good but they are very smart. It's not until the end of St. Mark's gospel, as Jesus dies on the cross, that any human person recognizes who Jesus really is. And that person was a pagan, a Roman centurion, who after seeing Jesus die, said: "Truly, this man was the Son of God." It took people a long time to find out who Jesus was, the devil recognized it immediately.

St. Mark tells us when Jesus taught the people and healed the possessed man his audience was spellbound and filled with awe.

The gospels not only tell us about Jesus, they tell us also about ourselves. What is the gospel telling us about ourselves today? It is asking us: how do we react to Jesus? Are we filled with wonder and awe when we hear him or think of him. Aesop told us over 2500 years ago: "Familiarity breeds contempt." Maybe we don't have contempt of our Lord, but after hearing about him for many years, our sense of awe and wonder can get dulled. How do we rekindle that excitement of hearing about him again? One way I know of is not to think we know all there is to know about him. We have to keep discovering more and more about him. Jesus is

the infinite Son of God and whatever we know about him is just a tiny little bit compared to what we have yet to discover. We can only do that through prayer. Today we pray the greatest prayer there is, a prayer Jesus himself gave us at the Last Supper. But our prayer life has to include more than just one hour a week in church. It must continue through the week. If Mass is the only prayer we pray all week, the Mass itself will become boring and dry.

Another way to recapture that sense of awe in Jesus is to praise him. Too often our prayers are limited to asking God for things we need or want. And that's good. But praise is also an important part of prayer and praise helps to lift our hearts to a sense of wonder as we come before our God. In Mass today we try to capture that sense of wonder and awe through the selection of hymns of praise. We praise God who has come to teach us and to help us with our everyday struggles with life and with the powers of evil around us.