

Feast of the Epiphany
January 2, 2005

INTRODUCTION

God's people had been living as slaves and exiles in Babylon for 50 years. But when the Persians conquered the Babylonians in 538 BC, the king of Persia allowed the Jews to return home. The prophet enthusiastically proclaims this return: "Rise up in splendor, Jerusalem! Your light has come..." The prophet sees more than the Jews reclaiming their homeland. He sees Jerusalem prospering and becoming the spiritual center for all nations. The Church sees this passage fulfilled in Jesus, who is the light of the world, inviting all people to follow the light he brings. 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 beautifully described at the end of the book of Revelation.

HOMILY

I want to tell you about a guy named Dave. He worked odd jobs that brought in enough money to provide for his wife and children. His greatest passion was baseball. He played ball for the local neighborhood team and he was a very good player. Soon word got around how good he was. In time he became known by the manager of the New York Yankees. He was eventually offered a contract assuring him of five million dollars for the next three years. But he turned it down. He wasn't trying to get a better deal out of them. He decided all the fame and fortune of a professional ball player would disrupt his life. He didn't want to change. He didn't want to have to give up being able to relax at home when he felt like it, drink his beer, watch his favorite TV shows and talk with the neighbors. He turned the Yankees offer down without any more discussion.

How could anyone be so unbelievably foolish? Sounds unreal, doesn't it? And it is! I made it all up. But in today's gospel is the real story of someone who was just as unbelievably foolish. It is King Herod, brilliant in many ways, but not in the way that mattered the most. Herod was the leader of the Jewish people, a people who had been longing, hoping and praying for a Messiah for centuries. He got a message that it was highly likely that the Messiah had just been born. He should have been overjoyed and filled with excitement that after centuries of waiting, the Messiah may have arrived, during his reign, and within a few miles of his own palace. We know from the rest of the story, he was not the least bit happy about it. He thought it would be too much of a threat to him. He didn't want things to change so he decided to destroy this baby who might upset his life. A little baby drove this great and powerful king to mass murder of innocent children, but that was Herod's style. He disposed of anyone whom he suspected might get in his way, including his brother, his wife and some of his own children. He was afraid he would lose everything while actually he had everything to gain. By the way, for all his efforts to preserve all he had, death took it all away from him about two years after Jesus was born.

We can all learn a lesson from Herod. Sometimes we are afraid we will lose everything to follow Christ more faithfully, but really we have everything to gain. God makes himself known to us in so many ways; those are our own Epiphanies. He invites us to get to know him better, to spend more time with him, to search for him in prayer, in the sacraments, to serve him more faithfully. When he makes himself know to us, we can close our minds and hearts, we can be like Dave, the ball player I made up, we can be like King Herod, jealously holding on to life the way we know it. We can refuse to let the Lord try to influence us, or we can be like those

wise men who knew they could not rest until they found the greatest treasure of all, Jesus, king of kings and Lord of lords.

Baptism of the Lord – A Cycle

January 9, 2005

INTRODUCTION

The words of the prophet Isaiah in today's first reading go back 500 years before Christ. God is, through the prophet, introducing his servant to his people. God is quite pleased with his servant. In a non-violent way, God's servant will establish justice in the world, be a light to the nations and liberation for captives. This passage was intended for the Jews who were in exile in Babylon. Scholars debate who this servant could have been, but with the coming of Christ, there is no doubt who is God's perfect servant. At Jesus' baptism, God introduces Jesus to the world, not just as his servant, but as his beloved Son with whom he is well-pleased.

HOMILY

If you struggle to understand the baptism of Jesus, you're not alone. The holy prophet, John the Baptist, the one about whom Jesus said "among those born of women, no one is greater than John," (Lk 7, 28) he had difficulty understanding why Jesus would be baptized. John said "I need to be baptized by you, and yet you are coming to me?" Jesus' answer is not satisfying when he says "it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness." This means little more than "it is necessary to do God's will." So we're in good company if we have difficulty understanding it.

It helps our understanding of this event if we realize that John's baptism was not the same as our sacrament of baptism. John said "I am baptizing you with water, for repentance...He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire." (Mt. 3,11) Jesus didn't need to be born again into God's grace like we do, for he is the source of all grace, but he didn't need to repent either. It is a mystery. As a matter of fact, the Holy Father made it one of the mysteries of the rosary, the first of the Luminous mysteries, the mysteries of light. It is worth reflecting on, because we'll never fully understand it.

That said, I will be bold enough to give a few reflections on why Jesus might have been baptized by John.

- 1) The first reason is pretty straight forward. Perhaps Jesus did this as an example to all of us that we all need baptism. We need to be reborn into God's life if we are to enter into the kingdom of heaven. (Jn. 3,5). We do

need to repent of our sins so we can live for God's kingdom, and Jesus led the way by accepting baptism for himself.

- 2) Perhaps this was the occasion when God the Father wanted to make the announcement to the Baptist and to those around him that this was his Son. Luke tells us specifically that the Spirit "came down *in visible form* like a dove." Whereas the other two gospels quote the Father as saying, "*You* are my beloved Son," it is obvious in Matthew's mind that God the Father was speaking to those who witnessed the event when he said "*This* is my beloved Son..." Don't ask me what was actually said. What is important is that at his baptism and through the gospel's description of it, Jesus is presented to all of us as God's Son, faithful and pleasing to God.
- 3) Remember that although John's baptism was for repentance, its ultimate objective was to prepare people for the coming of God's kingdom. Although he was without sin, perhaps Jesus' baptism was his way of showing his total commitment to God's kingdom.

You might be able to think of other reasons why Jesus came to be baptized by John. The most important thing for all of us to remember is that it was the *beginning* of Jesus' ministry. Immediately after his baptism he went into the desert to fast and pray for 40 days, then he began his work of teaching and healing until his work of service and love led to the cross. Our baptism, too, is a beginning, our beginning to be a follower of Christ. It's not an event that, after it's over, we can simply brush our hands together and say, "Well, that's done." I have too often seen this happen with parents, who bring their child for baptism, and once it takes place, I never see them again. Sure, baptism marked us as followers of Christ, but that mark could turn into a mark of shame if someday we have to stand before the Lord, marked as his follower, with little evidence that we really lived as if we were one of his followers. The Father announced at Jesus' baptism that Jesus was his beloved Son and Jesus *lived* as such. If we think we are special in being able to call ourselves God's sons and daughters because we were baptized, we are not special at all if we do not live as such.

***Second Sunday in Ordinary Time – A Cycle
2005***

January 16,

INTRODUCTION

Last week in our first reading we heard God speak through the prophet Isaiah about God's servant with whom he was well pleased. God's servant would establish justice in the world in a non-violent way. He would be a light to the

nations and open the eyes of the blind. This was the first of four so-called servant songs in the book of Isaiah. Today's first reading, generally referred to as the second servant song, tells us more about the servant and the servant's mission to bring light to all the nations and salvation to the ends of the earth. These passages were written over 500 years before Christ. Scholars do not know exactly who may have fit this description of God's servant at that time, but with the advantage of hindsight we see how perfectly the servant songs describe God's perfect servant, Jesus Christ.

HOMILY

Fr. O'Malley's day off was on Friday. One Friday during Lent he decided to go hunting. In tromping through the woods, he encountered a bear. They both saw each other at the same time. The bear started coming in his direction. He lifted his gun and took aim. However, his gun jammed and before he knew it the bear was on top of him. He prayed: God, save me. Make this bear a Christian. Better yet, make him a Catholic. Surely a good Catholic bear wouldn't eat meat on Friday during Lent. Suddenly the bear fell to its knees and started praying. The priest was so grateful until he heard what the bear was saying as he prayed: "Bless us Oh Lord and these thy gifts..."

Perhaps the word "gifts" might lead us into what I'm going to say today. We just concluded a time of significant gift giving. People give gifts for any number of reasons. Some gifts are given with strings attached, some are given because it's the expected thing to do, some are given to gain someone's favor. Other gifts are given purely out of appreciation or gratitude or love. For whatever reason, it's a basic part of human nature to give gifts. And it has always been just as basic to our human nature to want to give gifts to God. When we give a gift to God, it is called sacrifice. Scarcely any religion is known which does not have some form of sacrifice. In some primitive religions the gifts offered to God were a person's most precious possessions, their own children. This was common, for example, among the Canaanite people who lived in Palestine when the Israelites came into the land. In the story of Abraham and Isaac, God revealed to the Jewish people this was not what he wanted. Instead, the Israelites were to offer food and drink. It is food, of course, that keeps us alive, so when they offered food it was their way of saying they recognized they owed their life to God. Among the different kinds of food were cereal offerings, and libations, but the primary offering was an animal, and most frequently a lamb. Other than seeing lamb on a restaurant menu occasionally, the thought of a lamb never crosses our mind. But sheep were as common as telephones in Israel at the time of Jesus, and they still are. They provided wool for clothing, meat whenever they could afford it, and sacrifices for their God. In the

Temple of Jerusalem, priests offered a lamb twice a day as a sacrifice. On the Preparation Day before Passover, thousands of lambs were sacrificed for the traditional Passover meal. These lambs were sacrificed beginning at noon, the same time Jesus was condemned and died on the cross for us. St. John makes a specific connection between Jesus and the paschal lamb in his gospel when he applies one of the requirements for the Paschal lamb to Jesus: “not a bone of it will be broken.” (Jn 19,36)

When Jesus died on the cross, his sacrifice was perfect; it was offered in perfect love and it had infinite value. And because no other gift could compare with it, it replaced all the other sacrifices. Moreover, it was made available for all of us to share in this perfect sacrifice through Jesus’ words at the Last Supper: “do this in memory of me.” Even though we have a perfect way to worship our Creator, to offer God thanks and to acknowledge our dependence on God, somehow many people these days have become less interested in offering God anything. Whereas people in past centuries, even from earliest times, recognized God’s supremacy over all people and all creation, I get a kind of sense that many people now think of God as some kind of great uncle who is there to do their bidding, and when he doesn’t do what they want, they just turn their backs and shut him out of their lives. I guess in a way they’re saying: why give gifts to someone who doesn’t do what I want.

Jesus is more than a sacrifice, a perfect gift given to us by which we worship and honor our Creator. If we read the Book of Revelation (a.k.a. the Apocalypse) Jesus is represented there also as a lamb, a lamb who was slain, but who is now enthroned and glorified, praised and worshipped by all the heavenly hosts. From the throne of God and from the lamb flows life and blessings of every kind. Those who will enjoy these blessings and who will share in his victory are those who have followed the lamb. The Lamb of God is not just a perfect gift to God, but the way to eternal life for all of us.

Could John the Baptist have envisioned all of this when he called Jesus the “lamb of God.” Certainly John recognized the saving feature of Jesus’ presence for he refers to Jesus as the one who would take away the sin of the world. By sin of the world he means whatever it is in us that keeps us from the full and perfect joy of knowing and loving God. But there is another way of looking at this title “Lamb of God” that John gave Jesus. The Aramaic word for “lamb” was *talya*, a word that also meant “servant.” Thus we see the title “Lamb of God” connected with the first reading about God’s servant who would be a light to the nations that God’s

salvation might reach to the ends of the earth. We celebrate today a perfect act of worship. May it help us be more faithful servants of our God.

***Third Sunday in Ordinary Time – A Cycle
2005***

January 24,

INTRODUCTION: Galilee did not have a good reputation among the more orthodox Jews. Galilee is located about 75 miles north of Jerusalem. That doesn't seem very far today, but since most people traveled on foot at the time of Jesus, it was a considerable distance. There was a high population of Gentiles living there, people who were exiled there by the Assyrians 700 of years before Christ. Consequently there was a lot of paganism in Galilee. Those faithful Jews who did live there tended not to know their Jewish faith very well for they did not have all the opportunities for a good education that were available to Jews living in Jerusalem. Nor were the people living in Galilee able to participate in Temple worship very often, because there was only one Temple and it was in Jerusalem. So for these three reasons, the Jews living in Galilee were looked down upon by the Jews who lived in Jerusalem.

In spite of its unfortunate history, especially with the invasion of the Assyrians, and the destruction they left behind, the prophet Isaiah foretells good things for Galilee. Into the spiritual darkness that covered the land, Isaiah said a light would shine. You might remember those lines from the first reading on Christmas. St. Matthew quotes this long passage from Isaiah to explain why Jesus chose to preach in Galilee. 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' ministry in Galilee was in fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy. Jesus was the light that the people of Galilee, the people living in darkness, had longed for. In these readings Galilee is called by the names of two of the tribes of Israel that originally settled there: Zebulun and Naphtali.

HOMILY: The first book of the Bible, the book of Genesis, begins by telling us about how things began in our universe. And the book tells us the very **first** thing God created was light. It was a great and important gift, but of course light is useless unless we have the ability to see, so God gave us eyes

to see with and a brain to allow us to understand and process what we see. As we know we can shut off this power to see. We can close our eyes, we can turn out the lights, we can pull down the shades and live in the dark if we want, but unless we want to sleep or unless we have some mental problem, we normally don't do that. We enjoy the ability to see and we feel sorry for someone who can't.

In an extended sense we talk about seeing things mentally. In our imagination or our dreams we can see things and we can even speak of seeing abstract ideas. For example, when we're trying to solve a problem we might say "I see how that's done" or "This just dawned on me." When we begin to grasp some really big concept we may say "I see the light." This notion of seeing something with our mind's eye also applies to spiritual things too. St. Matthew describes Jesus' ministry in Galilee in the words of the prophet Isaiah: "the people who sit in darkness have seen a great light." Jesus used the symbol of light to describe himself when he said: "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life." (Jn 8,12) We have a theological term to describe this light that God gives us. That word is "revelation." And our decision to be guided by that light is called "faith." Faith is nothing other than a way of seeing, not with human eyes or human reason, but with God's eyes. Our faith gives us a vision of such things as why we were created, how we are to live, how we are to treat one another, what is going to happen after we die. It is a vision that is sometimes crystal clear, like when Jesus tells us about the importance of love, other times it is blurry; for example when St. Paul talks about the next life he tells us "at present we see indistinctly, as in a mirror" (– mirrors were not so wonderful in those days.) Faith is a way of seeing that is based simply on the word Jesus spoke to us. In some cases, as for example when he said: "This is my body," what we see with our eyes contradicts what we see with faith. But in faith we choose not to believe what our eyes tell us but to believe what we hear because it is based on God's word which is totally reliable. If you stop to think about it, I'm sure you would agree that so much of the darkness in the world today, and so many of our social problems as well as personal problems stem from the fact that people are choosing to close their minds to the light that Christ has brought us.

When we were baptized we were given a candle. With that candle came the words “Receive the light of Christ.” For most of us that candle was given to our parents or sponsors because when we were baptized we were too small to hold it, or if we did get hold of it, we probably would have tried to put it in our mouth or caught someone on fire. Of course, it was up to our parents to help us take that light of Christ and live by it, and we have taken it and live by it or we wouldn’t be here today. But now we’re old enough, we need to catch others on fire with that light, not literally of course, but spiritually. In two weeks we will hear Jesus tells us “you are the light of the world.” Today we heard about Jesus choosing four disciples who would one day set the world on fire with his light. But they are long dead, so as they passed Christ’s light on to others, we in our turn have to share with others the light we have received. We don’t have to get up and preach to do that. We can do it by the way we live, by being morally good, honest, loving people. And we can do it, when we have the opportunity, by simply telling others what our faith means to us. When we try to debate doctrine, we can get in a big argument, but if I tell someone how much my faith means to me, who can argue with that? God gave us a great gift when he created light and gave us the ability to see by it. But God gave us an even greater gift when he sent Jesus to us and gave us the ability to believe in him. For his light will enlighten our lives throughout eternity. Amen.

4th Sunday in Ordinary Time – A Cycle
2005

January 30,

Everybody has problems. Because we have been taught to pray for what we need, there is a part of us that expects God to work magic for us and take all our problems away when we ask him. Sometimes our prayers are answered just the way we want, and I assure you, while I am in favor of prayer, I also know that when we pray we don’t always get what we ask for. Now, I believe that no prayer is ever wasted and that somehow we will benefit from every prayer that we pray, but how do we explain those hard times when the problems do not go away no matter how hard we pray.

All the religions of the world try to give us help in dealing with those problems. The **Buddhists** teach that suffering comes from our desires. We make ourselves unhappy because we won’t accept the pain that comes from being attached to things, people and feelings. The only way to happiness and peace is to detach

ourselves from our desires and dreams. The **Hindus** believe that we keep being recycled through reincarnation, being born, dying and being born again. We are not going to be happy until we are released from the cycle, which keeps happening over and over as long as we are attached to our desires. Trying to escape our suffering also keeps the cycle going and it may lead us to be reborn into a lower life form the next time around. The **Jewish** approach to problems and suffering can be detected from the Jewish funeral. The last words spoken at a Jewish funeral come from the Book of Job: “The Lord has given and the Lord has taken away. Blessed be the name of the Lord.” It reminds us everything we have is a gift, a loan, from God and that it must be surrendered some day. The key to peace is acceptance of one’s sufferings. Interestingly enough, there is a popular writer, a psychiatrist and Episcopal priest, M. Scott Peck who begins his book, *The Road Less Traveled*, in a similar way. He says in the first sentence in his book: “life is difficult.” Then he argues that once we accept that life is difficult, it is not so difficult. It’s when we think it should be easy that we suffer more. In a similar fashion the Buddha once helped a young mother whose child died. She came to the Buddha for comfort. He gave her a seed and asked her to go around to her neighbors and collect other seeds from anyone who had never lost a loved one to death. When she came back to the Buddha she still had only the one seed the Buddha had given her. She found some comfort in knowing that everyone deals with sadness and loss in life. But knowing that others suffer is small comfort sometimes when we’re the one who’s suffering.

Jesus’ Beatitudes, which we just heard in today’s gospel, speak of suffering which Jesus connects with happiness. When we hear the Beatitudes, we must not think that was his entire sermon. The sermon goes on for three chapters, and it’s not the only sermon of Jesus that we will find in the gospels. So we can’t expect to find some simple formula for happiness in just these few verses. The road to happiness only begins here. You’ll notice they all began with the word “blessed.” Actually the Greek word in the original text of the gospel is “μακάριος” = *makarios*. The word means happy in an ordinary sense but it also means one is especially happy or favored or fortunate. That’s why it is translated “blessed.” In our materialistic, self-centered, prove it to me society, Jesus’ words seem almost contradictory. Especially when we see them as St. Luke presents them. You know, I’m sure, that Luke in his gospel gives us the Beatitudes. Luke’s version is pretty strong. He quotes Jesus as saying: “Blessed are you who are poor, blessed are you who are now hungry, blessed are you who are now weeping...” St. Matthew, whose gospel we just heard, makes them more spiritual, but even Matthew has a couple of “zingers” when he says “blessed are you who mourn... blessed are you who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness...” It sounds as if Jesus is telling us

happiness comes from suffering. Maybe it does. Suffering has a way of purifying us of our selfishness and paradoxically selfish people are not happy people. They are always dissatisfied.

We discussed the Beatitudes at our Parish Pastoral Council this past Tuesday, and I want to share some of the thoughts that were expressed. On one level, perhaps Jesus is telling us in the Beatitudes to stop looking at our problems so much and to count our blessings more often than we do and we would be happier. Or maybe in the Beatitudes Jesus is giving us hope, telling us to look beyond our sufferings to the eternal happiness we will have if we remain faithful to him. But I keep wondering if the Beatitudes speak to extreme forms of suffering.

On Wednesday I was invited to the Freedom Center. I kept thinking of the beatitudes as I saw all those exhibits on slavery. Those millions of people who suffered under slavery could hardly be considered blessed or fortunate. In the face of extreme suffering, perhaps people tend to turn more to God for help and they find in him their ultimate happiness, whereas people who have a lot materially often forget God and in doing so they have abandoned the true source of happiness. On a more profound level, perhaps we see here in miniature the “paschal mystery,” the Easter mystery, in which Jesus himself gave everything for us and entered into eternal glory at the right hand of the Father. Part of that paschal mystery is if we unite our sufferings with him (as we do especially in the Mass) we too will share in his glory. We cannot forget that God created us for happiness, a happiness that does not come from buying the latest gadget or newest fashion, but a happiness that comes from buying into his wisdom. As we unite ourselves and our offerings to his dying and rising here today, let us remain united with him until he calls us to an experience of happiness that will be divine and eternal. Amen.