

Isaiah 60: 1-6
Psalm 72: 1-7, 10-14
Ephesians 3: 1-12
St. Matthew 2: 1-12

Feast of the Epiphany 2023.

“That is, Gentiles have become fellow heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.” Ephesians 3: 6

The cruel Russian leader, Joseph Stalin, who systematically starved 3.9 million people in Ukraine during the 1930's to punish them, is said to have said, “If only one man dies of hunger, that is a tragedy. If millions die, that’s only statistics.” We can easily feel sympathy or distress when it affects someone close to us. It is harder for us to wrap our heads around large numbers like “millions” or “billions;” it’s easier for us to use these big numbers in a math problem, than to conceive of so many humans souls...

Let’s try to think together about a very large number of people. Let’s think about the Church... all around the world... and through the last 2000 years of history...

We confess week by week that we belong to the Catholic Church – that is, the body of Christians who share a common faith in Christ in all the essentials. But in practice, when we think about the Church of God, we tend to think of the relationships we have made between priest and people here, among our friends at St. Brice’s, or even within a small social group such as a Cursillo small group or another small group ministry... Our tendency, then, is to *shrink* our associations of “Church.” Today, however, I suggest we’re meant to go the other way around – that is, to think about the Church more broadly; to expand our horizons...

Today at St. Brice’s, we’re observing the Feast of Epiphany. (6 January was actually the day before yesterday, but we’ve moved it, or “transferred” it, to observe it today.) I’m sure most of us are very familiar with the story: Wise men from the east come to Jerusalem, get directions from King Herod, and follow a star and go to Bethlehem. When they meet little Jesus, the wise men worship, and offer amazing gifts of incense, bitter perfume, and gold... Then they return to their home country by another route...

What lessons can we draw from this story?... The wise men encountered the Lord Jesus, even as a tiny boy, and they worshiped – and so should we; certainly...

The wise men also offered amazing gifts... Some Christian teachers have observed that the gifts from the wise men prefigured something about Jesus Christ’s future ministry: Gold was a common gift for kings at the time, and we confess that Jesus Christ is the King of kings. Myrrh was commonly used as one the spices at burial – so in some sense, the offering of this bitter perfume for Jesus points ahead, to his redeeming death. Lastly, in ancient Jewish culture just as in some parishes today, incense is used as a kind of

reminder of our prayers ascending to heaven itself. So, these gifts to little Jesus are very significant and point to a spiritual reality...

What gifts can *we* offer to Jesus Christ, our Servant-King? Drawing from Romans 12, in the classical Anglican prayer after Communion, we “offer ourselves, our souls and bodies, to be a reasonable, holy, and living sacrifice.” That is, the best gift we can offer the Lord Jesus is dedicating ourselves to living beautifully for God. The haunting Christmas carol “In the Bleak Mid-Winter” perhaps says it best:

What can I give him – poor as I am;
If I were a shepherd, I would bring a lamb;
If I were a wise man, I would do my part.
Yet what I can, I give him – give my heart...

Yes – the wise men being led to worship and to offer amazing gifts are points to ponder this season. But there is one more point we need to pay attention to, which shocked the early Christians, and has resonated through the centuries to the Church today: Are we ready for it?... The wise men... weren’t Jewish!! They were Gentiles; foreigners... They came from some eastern country, and had traveled a very long way... We take it for granted that the good news of Christ’s love is open to *everyone*... For the infant Church, this fact was theological dynamite!... The Jewish people knew they were in a special covenant relationship with God. The first Christians were ethnically and theologically *Jewish* before becoming converted to serving Jesus Christ. But then, in the Book of Acts (which is like the History of the Church, Volume 1), chapter 10, the Jewish Christians were stunned to see that the Gentiles received the Holy Spirit! They could become followers of Jesus too!...

Do we remember? – Let’s remember when the Syro-Phoenician woman (the foreigner from the north) pleaded with Jesus to heal her daughter – and Jesus did! The early Christians realized that the gospel of Jesus Christ was for *everyone* – for wise men from the east, and for *all* people... God’s mercy and generosity was far broader than had ever been previously thought possible...

So, we see that the Church of Jesus Christ is far broader, far more encompassing, than what was ever previously thought possible...

There’s one more thing to keep in mind: God uses *us* – he uses you and me – to advance his purposes. It’s God the Holy Spirit who draws all people to himself. But God commonly uses ordinary people like you and me to do extra-ordinary things, like – introducing them to Christ...

I've realized that during COVID, evangelization has taken a back seat for many of us – not just at St. Brice's, but throughout the Canadian Church, and beyond... But evangelism isn't just for when the world is a healthy place. It is for *all* people, for all time. We have the privilege of being utterly normal in an abnormal world. Some people will decline our invitations, but others can surprise us... Being nothing other than ourselves, it is our privilege and our joy to shine for Christ, and simply to invite. God does the rest.

May we contribute to the vision of the Church worldwide; broad; full of grace. Those wise men so long ago showed the true breadth of God's vision. And so can we.

Thanks be to God.