

THE EPIPHANY WEEK

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Sunday

GOD ALWAYS FINDS WAYS TO GIVE HIS GIFTS

A reflection inspired by a text from Carroll Stuhlmueller

The celebration of Epiphany is at the origin of our Christmas gift-giving. Jesus is God's "Great Gift" to us all and 'epiphany' means "making the gift known". We are celebrating God's making Jesus known to us, as a community and personally, and God's calling us to make Jesus known to others. We have received a gift and we are to give that same gift.

Originally, the Church celebrated three "manifestations" of Jesus as the Christ on this day: The manifestation to the pagan world, represented by the Magi, the manifestation to Israel, represented by Jesus' baptism, and the manifestation of the fullness of life to which God calls both Israel and all the world, represented by the wonder at the marriage feast in Cana. Nowadays, Epiphany focuses attention on the Magi and the world still to be evangelized.

The Magi came from some unspecified place in the "east", probably Babylon and/or Persia. This reflects the most surprising way in which God led them to Christ—through astrology and dream interpretation. In general, no one had preached the coming of a Savior to the world at large. So God drew these ancestors of ours to Christ using "fake knowledge" which they trusted—the highly developed system of astrological prediction that had gone out from Babylon to the whole ancient world. Whatever "special sign" might have been seen in the heavens was interpreted as the coming of a universal king to bring justice and peace to the world and, for whatever reason, this was linked to the Jews and so to a "king of the Jews". When consulted the Jewish sages interpreted this as the "Messiah", and so they were led to Jesus.

People come to Jesus for all sorts of reasons. They come because they took certain things for granted that seemed to point to him. Like the Magi, what they take for granted as truth may actually be false, but it doesn't matter so long as they come to Jesus, and so to the One God and to salvation. We aren't responsible for making sure people come to Jesus for the "right reasons". We aren't responsible for teaching them the objective truth as a replacement for whatever they believe. We know Jesus is our savior and the savior for all people on the earth. Let them come to their Savior and He will teach what they need to know to worship and love God with all their hearts and minds and strength, and to love their neighbors as Jesus loves.

This is the gift we have been given. All we are responsible for is giving that gift to others. Why they seek it or accept it is between them and God. What is important is that we give and that they receive—no matter our reasons for giving or theirs for accepting the gift. God will guide them to their Savior and then guide them again to their homes and to the others with whom they will share what they have received. We have no way to know whether what they receive matches what we sought to give them. That, once again, is between them and God. We give simply by living the gift we have received with all our heart and mind and strength. Let us do it in joy and gladness, giving God the glory and leaving others in God's most capable hands.

Monday

THE MAGI'S GIFTS AND LIFE'S JOURNEY

From reflections by Megan McKenna & Carroll Stuhlmueller

During the days following Epiphany we receive many reminders that we are God's children and that God's greatest gift—to us and to all the world—is the love shown us, first in the Only Begotten Son and second in those God has called to be one with that Son. Traditionally, this is symbolized by the Magi and their gifts.

John sought to be very clear about this with his beloved community. The love of God, he says, is pragmatic and practical and wholly specific. Love of God and love of neighbor are one reality. Jesus tells us that being holy is a matter of love and that this means serving one another practically. We are to love even our enemies, to pray for them and forgive them, and to lovingly help the homeless and foreign and give them not only shelter but a warm hearted welcome.

The reaction of very many to this kind of love is not be positive. John says, “The reason the world does not recognize us for who we are, is that it never recognized the Son for who He is”. This is truth-telling, directed to us who will have to experience that truth in just the measure we love others as Jesus has loved us. Even Jesus' first disciples had a problem with his way of loving.

Recall how Jesus responded to a crowd of people who had been listening to his teaching for days and had now run out of food. He called his disciples and ordered them: Give them something to eat! But they objected: It would cost almost a year's salary to give each a little and where would we be able to buy so much?

What Jesus did has always reminded believers of the liturgy: He raised his eyes to heaven, he pronounced a blessing, he broke the bread he had and gave it to the disciples to distribute. It was enough and more. The Eucharistic is the symbol of this. It symbolizes the way the charity we learn from Jesus transforms our lives and so the situations of those in need. Jesus has fed us with the bread of life so we too may share Him, the true bread of life, with others. Jesus is always enough. So we know he will be enough for everyone.

God's love implants life in us so that we can respond beyond our ordinary human capabilities and strength and endurance. Through the years many have seen this message in the gifts of the Magi. They ask: What happened to them? They answer: The Holy Family used them when forced to flee into Egypt and build a life there until they were free to return home.

Suppose we look upon ourselves as gifts like those the Magi gave. When others can no longer live as before, due to oppression or persecution, or the need to escape sin, to whom do they turn. Think of those who come to a monastery. They seek support, counsel and the practical love needed to begin a new life—until God calls them home. We are gifts like those of the magi to those whom God calls to live in Jesus. Today we are called to reach out, to extend our touch and love. We reach for the holiness realized in such holy love. We do this with Jesus and in doing it, we like the Magi, make Jesus known for who he truly is—God's love in human form.

Tuesday

JESUS' CALL TO PRACTICAL CHARITY

The Daughters of Charity Constitutions by St. Elizabeth Ann Seaton

“The principle end for which God has called the Sisters of Charity is to honor Jesus Christ as the source and model of all charity by rendering to him every temporal and spiritual service in their power by serving the poor, sick, invalid, children, prisoners, the insane or people who through shame conceal their need. In order that they may correspond with the grace of that vocation .. they must endeavor to live a holy life and apply great care to their own perfection, joining the exercises of the interior and spiritual life to their exterior work. ... The first thing they must endeavor to observe inviolably is to hold the salvation of their souls in higher consideration than anything in the world and to keep themselves always in a state of grace and shun mortal sin more than the infernal spirit... They shall perform all they do, both spiritual and temporal, in a spirit of humility, charity, and simplicity. They shall abhor the maxims of the world and embrace those of Jesus Christ, among these they shall recommend mortification, the contempt of self and all things earthly, preferring work that is repugnant to the inclinations of nature and taking always the last place, persuading themselves that with all this they will still be better off than they deserve on account of their sins.

They shall have no attachment to anything created—particularly to places, to works, and to persons including their parents. They shall always be disposed to quit all when obedience requires it, remembering the Lord’s words that we aren’t worthy of Him if we are not ready to part with father, mother, brothers and sisters for His sake, and renounce ourselves as well. They shall suffer cheerfully and for love of God inconveniences, contradictions, scoffings, and calumnies and other mortifications which may happen to them, even due to their good actions ... and that all this is only part of the cross which Jesus wills them to carry following Him on earth so as to deserve the happiness of living forever with Him. They shall have a great confidence in Divine Providence, abandoning them-selves to it without reserve as an infant to its nurse, fully persuaded that, provided on their part they strive to be faithful to their vocation and to the observance of their rules, God will ever keep them under his protection and assist them in every necessity of soul and body, even when everything should appear to be lost.

They must, above all things, cherish and respect on another as true sisters who our Lord has united together in his service by a special profession of charity and do their utmost to preserve a perfect union amongst themselves. They shall treat one another with Christian meekness and respectful cordiality which must always appear both in their words and on their countenance. They must willingly bear with the imperfections of their sisters as they would wish their own frailties to be overlooked. If through human frailty it should happen that a sister give some cause of mortification to another, she shall not fail to ask pardon on her knees before going to bed, and the other sister shall receive this humiliation with humility and kindness going on her knees also. This is a sovereign and speedy remedy to heal the bitterness of heart and resentment which may remain due to

the fault.”

Wednesday

SEEKING TOTAL DEDICATION TO GOD'S SERVICE

From the Seminary Diary of St. John Neumann

“Reason and revelation, the nature of our soul and intimate and multifaceted connections between all things teach us that the present is tied to the future in a way that cannot be dissolved. Everything that we have and do has its consequences and these extend to infinity. One day we will reap what we have sown. Regarding that which we can expect as recompense we know it won't be insignificant. It may be that the good or bad thoughts that we cultivate, or the good or bad passions that we sustain, that the good or bad actions we do will darken one another, weaken one another, or lead us to forget them, but there is no passage of time that can cancel out the traces they leave in our souls.

Actually, after years and years or even centuries they can come to life again as vivid and powerful as ever, and as able to cause us shame or contentment, pleasure or displeasure. And we will be just as wise or stupid about them, just as good or evil, just as perfect or imperfect. It will be just as easy or difficult to think prudently and live a virtuous life and reflecting on the past will be just as agreeable or disagreeable (as it was). Reason and Scripture teach us to believe that the Lord, our Judge, will sharpen our spirit's perception on That Day and will cause us to see finally the thoughts, imaginings, and deeds we have long held out of sight and buried in the abyss we call forgetfulness.

If, then, the present is connected with so much precision and so inextricably to the future, then we ought and are able to look at the present and deal with it always by considering the future. That is what every wise person does, and every priest does it in a special way. I am not ever going to lose sight of the future! The future is going to be in my view every day of my life so that each day becomes a preparation for eternity. In this way I will sow each day some good seed for the future harvest.

O Jesus, my Lord, you have already given me a most powerful longing for you! Come to me and rest in me always. Take me from this valley of tears so that I may be able to praise you forever with your saints. Jesus, grant that I may die for you! I want to be your disciple and be near you forever! Yet, during this very Christmas time when you seem so near, I told a lie. And then I got upset and forgot my morning prayer. O my God, where will I end up? Turn my consolation into repentance so that I may regret my sins. My great vice is laziness, and even laziness in carrying out the duties that go with my state in life. O Jesus, give me greater humility and more fervent zeal! You know I want to let go of everything that gets in the way of following you. I was carried away by vanity hearing my language skills praise by an English-speaking visitor. Give me the humility to acquire basic virtue. O most wise, O most holy One, guide my tongue. If you wish to send me to help other peoples make me capable of being faithful to you.

Thursday

SHARING FAITH AND THE WORKS OF FAITH

A reflection from a sermon by St. Pope Leo the Great

The world was on the way to perdition and God determined to rescue it and all of us. In merciful providence, our loving God foreordained the salvation of all peoples in Christ. Recall the promise made to Abraham that his offspring would be more numerous than the stars of heaven. These are the offspring he acquires, not according to the laws of nature, but by the fruitfulness of faith. This is how his offspring become countless—he is to be the father of all nations. He was given this hope from heaven.

How is the full number of the nations to enter the family of the patriarch and become sons of the promise? How are they to receive the blessing of Abraham? They are to do this by receiving the gift of faith. This is symbolically realized in the Magi that came to seek Christ from the East. In them we see all the peoples of the world begin to come to their God and Savior. No longer is God known only in Judea but in the entire world. Thus, it will happen that in every place God's name will be magnified.

We are among the instruments by which our God, the God of all the universe, becomes the God of all peoples of the earth. We have been taught by divine grace about the mysteries of redemption. We are invited to celebrate this day as the day of our first fruits. It is the day that brings to mind our initial call. We are to do this with spiritual joy. What I call to your attention is that this very joy is the primary instrument by which you are to accomplish this great mission.

Listen to the words of Scripture. "God has qualified us to share the lot of the holy ones in light". He does this by "delivering us from the power of darkness and transferring us into the kingdom of his Beloved Son". This is the fulfillment of Isaiah's words, "the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, and day has dawned upon those who dwelt in the shadow of death". Abraham, we are told, never saw this day except in hope and prophecy. We have begun to see it in fact. Isn't this enough cause for us to rejoice!

All that was foretold and prophesied has come to pass since the three Magi were called from their far-off land and led by a new star to recognize and worship the true King of heaven and earth. The same star, appearing in our hearts as faith, draws us to Christ, and draws us to share the joy of the Magi. Have you entered into a new life through Christ? Is this newness of life also a joy? Isn't it true that the greater a joy the more we can't stop ourselves from sharing it? Is there anything that people more gladly share than joy itself? But the fuller your sharing in the way of living that is Christ's, the fuller is your joy! If you will but live this joy you will draw more and more people, and peoples, to the Lord. All want to share joy!

How is the world to know that the joy we experience is based in a reality that genuinely transforms us? We see it in the works of love that spring from this joy. This is how the leadership of the star which is faith draws us to imitate the Magi's acts of homage and of sharing their own excitement. This is the light that shines from the children of light, leading others by the love that works through faith. Come, let your light shine before all!

Friday

FAITH THAT LIVES THROUGH WORKS

A reflection from a sermon by Bishop Thomas of Villanova

What we behold through the feast of Epiphany is a faith that sees deeper than our ordinary senses. The Magi hadn't seen Christ perform miracles or mighty works. They hadn't beheld him walking on water, giving sight to the blind or raising the dead. They hadn't even heard his wisdom or teaching. They saw only a child living in extreme poverty and lowliness. Yet they recognized God and worshipped him and gave him their riches. That was wonderful faith indeed, as wonderful as that of the thief who prayed to him on the cross. Yet perhaps it is even more wonderful to recognize God when you see a baby feeding at its mother's breast than when you see one turning to God as he groans out his life in a horrible death. After all, the thief had heard of Jesus' works but the Magi had no such help.

How are we to learn from such an example of faith? Perhaps we can do it by accompanying those sages. It is wonderful to recognize God when we are shown him enthroned and crowned in glory but even more when consorting with animals and poor people. We don't even have the guidance offered by the light of a new star. We have only the light of faith by which to see Christ and learn from him. But we do have this light! This is our most reliable guide on the pathways of life.

Whoever you may be, if you thirst for God and for the vision of the Lord in all his eternal glory, if you long to share in divine happiness, if you truly long with all your heart to reach the goal of all human desiring, don't turn your eyes away from the God who dwells in the poor and with the humble. This presence can be grasped only by the light of the star of faith.

What must we do to seek God in fervor of spirit? We have to search diligently for Christ where he truly is present. We have to search perseveringly. We mustn't let any earthly circumstances blind us to God's presence. We mustn't let earthly riches made us blind to God as he really is among us. Don't even let the prospect of hardships or misfortunes hold you back or blind you.

The Magi show us where to find Christ. They show us that when we glimpse him it is time to open our treasures and pour them out in his service. The family of Jesus was poor. They used the Magi's gifts for the necessities of life. If we refuse this sharing, we refuse to recognize Christ where he really is. Isn't that what some have to face on the day of judgment, when they have to confess they did not recognize Christ in the poor and needy, and so didn't serve or help him?

We never have to appear in God's presence empty handed. We always have gifts to share with others. They are gifts God has given us. Didn't he give them to us so that we might share them? If you follow the star of faith you will not only find Christ, but will realize you have found him as you share the gifts you have already received. They may be simple gifts but they give life eternal.

Saturday

GOD AND GOD’S JOY ARE FOUND IN LOWLINESS

A reflection taken from a homily by St. Basil the Great

The star came to rest over the place where the child lay. When they saw this the Magi were filled with great joy. Do you want to welcome that joy into your heart? Then you have to be prepared to see Christ where he is truly found and to worship God in his real dwelling place.

We are summoned today to welcome the joy of Christ’s coming into our hearts. But to do this we have to let our God transform our sight so that we can see the star which tells us where God is to be found. The angels sang: “This day is born to us a Savior who is Christ the Lord. The Lord is our God and God has shown upon us!” For fear of terrifying us God did not dazzle our eyes by appearing in the very form of God. God has come to us as a servant. Unless we open our hearts to see this truth, we can’t be set free from blindness and from our former bondage.

The stars journey through the heavens, and the Magi journey from distant lands, and both would witness to the earth the reception of the redeemer. He is received in a cave used to stable animals. Can you look upon this fact and let gratitude fill your heart and mind? Can you look at this fact and find in it good reason to celebrate the world’s salvation?

Think of these words: Today Christ is born in our humanity. That is what is so astounding—God reveals salvation through a seemingly count-for-nothing human baby. We can’t any longer say, “You are earth and to earth you shall return”. Now we have to say, “You are united to heaven and to heaven you shall be admitted”. And all this is true because “for us a child is born, to us a son is given, and sovereignty shall be upon his shoulders”.

Where do we find God, our saving God, today? The answer isn’t that we find God in Bethlehem. We find God in those who need a cup of water or a place to lay their head. We find God in a pregnant girl who has no place in which to bring forth her child. Do you leap for joy when you find yourself face to face with such a person? If not then you haven’t let the Magi and the star guide you to the place where the Christ is, and where he awaits your adoration and your gifts. Isn’t that what Christ himself has taught us? Isn’t the wonder the fact that God reveals Godhead in the lowliness of humanity—not only once but continually.

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