

EPIPHANY 1

Text: Matthew 2:1, Romans 12:1

“...and, lo, the star, which they saw in the east, went before them, till it came and stood over where the young child was. When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceeding great joy. And when they were come into the house, they saw the young child with Mary his mother, and fell down, and worshipped him: and when they had opened their treasures, they presented unto him gifts; gold, and frankincense, and myrrh.”

Today as the Christmas season comes to an end and we reflect on the first gifts of Christmas, let us think about what we will place before the Christ child in Thanksgiving for all that He has given to us.

Epiphany is the season where the Church commemorates the manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles. It begins with the story of how three men, from a far off land, or lands, in the east, who studied the heavens, followed one exceptional star which led them to the place where the infant Jesus lay. They are frequently referred to as the wise men; no doubt because in a comment made by some women of the church, they stopped and asked for directions. They traveled to that place, perhaps not fully sure why at first, but by the time they got there the reason for their journey was clear for they fell down and worshipped the Lord and presented Him with very valuable gifts.

There are a few things that we need to keep in mind to put this all into perspective. First, our Lord came among us to bring salvation to the Jews. Yet in the early part of His life, He was already becoming a beacon of hope for those who were not of God's chosen people, those referred to as Gentiles. These three men had traveled a great distance, made what I am sure was a very difficult life's journey, to reach a point in their lives where they could present themselves in contrite worship before God, and offer what they felt was of great value to the Lord.

This journey was not dissimilar to our own. We look to the Lord as our destination in life, seeking to present ourselves as acceptable to Him. But we find that the struggles of life often divert us. Sometimes our steps of faith are slowed by the sands of distress or doubt. Yet we continue on, hoping we will someday find the answers to life's great mysteries and embrace the solace we seek from the influences of the world.

Our journey however needs to focus on the destination. As the wise men were moved to undertake their journey, we too are moved to make our own pilgrimage to Christ. We hope to someday stand in the presence of our Lord and fall down and worship Him, and present ourselves as gifts, but I wonder if our Savior will find our efforts acceptable.

Scripture tells us what God considers valuable and as we think about our own life, we hope we will please God. Love for Him and each other, a contrite heart, a desire to confess our sins, absolute trust, growth in faith, the works of our hands through that faith, a generous spirit, openness about what we believe, our efforts to spread His Gospel,

regular prayer, formal worship, study of His word, a changed heart and total dependence on Him are what God asks of us.

Now we often find that these gifts of value to God often get misplaced or lost, mixed in with everything else we carry, or become burdensome and questioned. Ultimately, when we think about coming before the Lord, we wonder if our lives reflect the very best we have to give or the tarnished and broken pieces of a life that has turned away from Him.

In my own ministry, I have seen many who have turned away so completely from God that they will never wish to begin the journey. These people really distress me for I cannot understand how man can go through life without the hope our Lord and Savior offers us. But of deeper concern, are those who start the journey but in the course of the trip, get sidelined. Many of our fellow Christians seem to have a hard time understanding what God considers important and how to build a relationship with Him.

In this life, the traumas or the pleasures of the world often distract us, weaken our faith or indeed outright separate us from God. We think we can go it alone and often find doubt fills our hearts and minds. Yet, we are reminded in Scripture that we should never lose hope and that we should always keep focused on Him and that we should strive to give the very best of ourselves over to God.

St. Paul puts it very well in his letter to the Romans. "By the mercies of God, present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service." The world will work against us, life's challenges will work against us, mankind will work against us, the devil will work against us, but as St. Paul says, the further we turn from the distractions of the world, the more we turn toward God. "Do not conform yourselves to the standards of this world: but let God transform you inwardly by a complete change of your mind. Then you will be able to know the will of God-what is good and pleasing to Him and is perfect." (TEV)

We should be filled with a strong desire to please Him and thank Him for all that He has given us. Everything in our lives should glorify God. Yet even if we stumble, it is our perseverance to grow in love, faith and trust that shapes the gift of our lives that we want to give to Him. We must pray for God's help to set aside the ways of the world, our hate and discontent, our dissatisfaction and insecurity, our pain and suffering, and to ask Him to allow us to focus on one thing and one thing alone, our total commitment to Him. That is the precious gift which is most valuable to God, for as He is eternally faithful to us we too must endeavor to be faithful to Him.

As we ponder the gifts of the Magi, let us ponder our own gifts to Him in Thanksgiving for what He has given us. Eternal life, salvation from our sins, total peace, unchanging love and hope; for these things are truly something to be grateful for.

Do our lives and all that we do, glorify God? If we are not too sure, than perhaps we are off course. In this new year, with all of our resolutions about losing weight or slowing down in our lives, this is a perfect time to refocus our lives on our relationship with God.

For in this transitory life, nothing else really matters. May our journey in life be filled with His presence and may it take us only to Him. AMEN

Fr. Jeffrey Monroe