

Reflection on the Sunday Readings

THE EPIPHANY OF THE LORD

Roads

There seems to be no end of biographies and autobiographies and memoirs. We love to read of life journeys, of the paths people followed or the trails they blazed. We compare their stories to ours, their journeys to ours, their roads taken and not taken to ours. Epiphany is the story of a road taken by astrologers, passing strangers, wonderful and just about exotic, but not quite. For this story is also ours.

FIRST READING: Isaiah 60:1–6 RESPONSORIAL PSALM: Psalm 72:1–2, 7–8, 10–11, 12–13
SECOND READING: Ephesians 3:2–3a, 5–6 GOSPEL: Matthew 2:1–12

Comment

Never has Jerusalem stood so high and proud as it stands today in the words of Isaiah. This reading is the last part of a three-author (at least) book that begins before Israel's exile, the bitter, long exile itself, and finally the release and homecoming. This great wonderful day of release from bondage, this dream of triumph and glory is what we read about today. Here, Isaiah looks ahead to the great time when the city is awash in the Lord's own light and brilliance. All roads lead to Jerusalem, this shining city on a hill. Jerusalem is addressed as a person to whom everyone hastens with great joy.

This reading anticipates all that is good. Everyone comes home. First come the regular folks—sons and daughters and babies—and then the rest of the world. The generous heart of Jerusalem opens to receive all the riches of other nations that flow ever toward it. The dromedaries and camels laden with gold and frankincense mentioned in this reading conjure up the wealthy and royal retinues that in Isaiah's prophecy will one day trek toward Jerusalem.

But we, at the beginning of this millennium, think of the coming of the kings at Epiphany. The first reading resonates with the later coming of the astrologers or magi, those seers who consulted stars and dreams, as we see in today's Gospel. These exotic astrologers came a long and perhaps circuitous route. They consulted the local potentate, Herod, who paid no attention whatsoever to Jewish ways. He surely would have paid no mind to these astrologers, except that they became a red flag. They threatened his hold on power, so he summoned them and cunningly and disingenuously inquired about how they read the stars and what it might mean (to Herod, of course). That duty done, the astrologers found their way to the Holy Family and offered the gifts fit for a royal child—gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

Reflection

The astrologers, or magi, stand in for all the non-Jews of the world, just as the shepherds on Christmas night stood in for all the poor and dispossessed, the most illogical of all worshipers. No one would have expected the glad tidings to be delivered to the lowly shepherds. Similarly, no one quite expected Gentile astrologers from Persia or thereabouts to make their way to Israel and break open the story of salvation to the whole surprised world. And no one was quite ready for the almost fanatical Pharisee, Saul, to carry the good news of the Messiah to the non-Jewish world. In today's second reading, Paul reminds the Ephesians and himself once again of the amazing truth of his conversion. The revelation once given to the prophets and apostles was given to him! The revelation is not just for Israel, but is for the whole world—Israel and beyond Israel, right to Persia and beyond to the lands of the rising and setting sun. Jews and Gentiles alike share in the same Body of Christ and are coheirs of eternal life.

The doors are indeed thrown open to the whole world. As the new bright and shining Jerusalem, the Church must welcome all who come by any route, any route whatsoever. Every person who knocks at the door of Christianity and seeks Christ must be welcomed. Their stories must be told and heeded. They who have sought Christ by whatever light they have must be helped to see by the light of Christ that shines on all, the Christ who has come for all. It is no surprise that the small family rituals of this feast day endure. In Southern European countries and in the churches of the Eastern Rite, Epiphany takes primacy of place over Christmas as a feast day. Gifts are given, in imitation of the gift-giving of the magi. Doors are thrown open in welcome on this Twelfth Day of Christmas, "Little Christmas," as it sometimes is known in the northern latitudes. This is the day we open our doors and hearts in welcome. This is the day we honor all seekers and seers, are helped by them, and help them as best we can.

Reflection on the Weekday Readings

MONDAY, JANUARY 4

FEAST OF ELIZABETH ANN SETON, RELIGIOUS

Individuality flowers in the universal church

Two hundred years ago Elizabeth Ann Seton founded the Sisters of Charity of Saint Joseph's, the first new community for religious women to be established in the United States. Pope Paul VI said at her canonization as the U.S.'s first native-born saint: "Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton is an American. All of us say this with special joy, and with the intention of honoring the land and the nation from which she sprang forth as the first flower in the calendar of the saints." Today we celebrate being part of a universal church that nevertheless honors specific cultures and peoples.

TODAY'S READINGS: 1 John 3:22-4:6; Matthew 4:12-17, 23-25

"They brought to him all who were sick."

TUESDAY, JANUARY 5

FEAST OF JOHN NEUMANN, BISHOP

Dream the impossible

One of the most remarkable features of Saint John Neumann's life (1811-1860) is that he was able to become a priest in the first place. By the time he decided to join the priesthood, there was a surplus of clergy—not only in his native Bohemia but all over Europe. Every inquiry elicited the same response: All ordinations were suspended for the foreseeable future. Undaunted, Neumann wrote to the bishop of New York, who agreed to ordain him. He had to travel halfway across the world to achieve his dream, but he did it. God does not give us dreams we cannot achieve. What dream have you put off because it seemed "impossible"? Today is the day to reconsider taking that first step.

TODAY'S READINGS: 1 John 4:7-10; Mark 6:34-44

"As he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them . . . and he began to teach them many things."

WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 6

CHRISTMAS WEEKDAY

Believing is seeing

"No one has ever seen God," the First Letter of John says. If that's so then how can people know what God is like and what God wants us of us? The answer is fairly simple. While we may have to wait until after our earthly pilgrimage to know God fully, we can see God *now*. God is love, scripture says. In the love we show others, and others show us, God is present right in front of us. The Christmas and Epiphany celebrations have amply demonstrated God's original love for us. How about returning the favor?

TODAY'S READINGS: 1 John 4:11-18; Mark 6:45-52

"If we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us."

THURSDAY, JANUARY 7

FEAST OF RAYMOND OF PEÑAFORT, PRIEST

Love: The secret weapon

Today's saint, Raymond of Peñafort (1175-1275), lived during a time when much of Spain was under Muslim rule. Rather than take up arms against them, Raymond learned to speak Arabic and used his resources to build schools for Arab children. He even got his buddy, Thomas Aquinas, to write a book explaining the Christian faith to Muslims. He believed that love was greater than military might—he couldn't have been too far off because he lived to be 100!

TODAY'S READINGS: 1 John 4:19-5:4; Luke 4:14-22a

"Whatever is begotten by God conquers the world. And this is the victory that conquers the world, our faith."

FRIDAY, JANUARY 8

CHRISTMAS WEEKDAY

Keep your Christmas present

It is two weeks since Christmas. You remember Christmas—"May your days be merry and bright" and all that. Too often we think of "getting through the holidays" rather than savoring, like fine wine, the implications of "God with us." Our attitude often resembles the routine of the classroom: data traveling from the notes of the professor to the notes of the student without having spent time in the mind of either one. What Christmas celebrates is nothing less than the most radical moment in human history: the leap from the divine to the human, piercing the veil, God taking root in skin and bone and changing our destiny forever. The lights may be packed away, the gifts exchanged, but that's trivia. How have I been changed by these days? In his first letter John evokes "water, blood, and Spirit," a triple, shattering testimony to Jesus as Son of God and to our own eternal life because of him. We need time to take that in.

TODAY'S READINGS: 1 John 5:5-13; Luke 5:12-16

"There are three that testify: the Spirit and the water and the blood."

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Readings for next Sunday's Liturgy: January 10: Isaiah 42:1-4, 6-7 Psalm 29:1-2, 3-4, 3, 9-10; Acts 10:34-38; Luke 3:15-16, 21-22.