

Ephiphany
January 2-3, 2010

Don't you love the feast of Epiphany? They call it "little Christmas," and some people and cultures celebrate it even more colorfully than December 25th. Liz Houlihan does – she always has a big celebration at her house on the evening of Epiphany!

It's easy to understand why -- the gorgeous story of the Magi is among the favorites of Christian people everywhere. It is colorful, rich, multi-leveled and it stimulates the imagination. I always love it when those three figures appear at our crib with their royal clothes and precious gifts, and of course that camel! The song calls them three kings from the Orient, but in reality, our scripture tells us very little about them – who they were, where they came from, or how many of them there really were – we usually think there were three, but that's only because there were three gifts. Throughout history, we've woven stories about them, even giving them spectacular names like Casper, Melchior, and Balthasar. They probably were astrologers, and they probably traveled in a caravan to Jerusalem. But we don't really know. All the scriptures tell us is that there were magi from the east and that they brought gold, frankincense and myrrh.

But one central thing for us to remember as we celebrate this feast of the Epiphany is that this feast commemorates the revelation of the God's glory **to all people**. In our scriptures there were two special groups of people who came to visit the new-born child: the shepherds and the magi. However, our church has no special feast to commemorate the visit of the shepherds, but we have this special feast of Epiphany today to celebrate the visit of the magi. Why is that? Perhaps it's because the shepherds learned of the birth of Jesus through a direct revelation from angels appearing in the midnight sky. They were told where to go, and how to know when they were there, and it wasn't very far. They didn't have a whole lot to figure out -- it was a direct and supernatural revelation.

But the magi had only a special star to guide them; they had to interpret its meaning, and travel a long way, over some time. They weren't familiar with the Hebrew scriptures, and certainly not the local politics. But they made it there anyway, worshipped the child, and offered gifts. And that's why these strange travelers from the distant East have become central figures of this feast: even these outsiders were drawn to the glory of God's light! Today's feast serves as an annual reminder that, whether we be Gentile or Jew, Muslim or Christian or Hindu, Eastern or Western, whatever our nation, race, or state of life – we are family to one another in God's eyes.

And notice how in fact there were three different groups who came to know where the Son of God was born. There were the shepherds, who they came to know where to find him through a direct vision of angels. There were our magi, who came to find him through a reading of the stars. And there were also King Herod, his chief priests and scribes, whom the magi consulted, who came to

know where he was through searching the scriptures. Visions, stars, scriptures -- different ways of arriving at the same truth.

Yet the crucial difference in this story remains: Who actually came to find Jesus? Herod and his religious advisors had the scriptures to guide them, but they failed to find Jesus. But the magi who followed the natural light of the stars did find him. Why was this? Because those in authority, even though they possessed the shining truth of revealed scriptures, did not follow it. They were all too caught in Herod's devious little plot. But the magi, who enjoyed only the light of a star, followed its guidance. It is not just the possession of the truth that matters, it is how prepared we are to walk in the light of the truth that we have. It is better to have the dim light of the stars and follow it than to have the bright light of the holy scriptures and ignore it.

As Christians have great gifts of faith available to us. But what does that benefit us if we do not walk in the truth? Nature worshippers or non-believers who are sincerely committed to following the light of natural reason may arrive at Jesus before Christians who have the exalted truths revealed by God but who do not walk the walk of faith. This is the challenging truth that confronts us today in the story of these wise men who seek and find the Lord.

But we should take heart! We should know that we are not alone in our search for the child! We are together, all of us here. That brings us to a wonderful image we find, given plainly in the first reading and suggested by our gospel: the **caravan!** I like that image – I've used it with you before. It's much more evocative than the word "community." Like the magi, we are on a caravan, we travel together. We may not all be in exactly the same place on the journey... some of us are right in front, some of us straggle along... some of us are bold and confident, and some of us cautious or doubtful... some of us are passionate about the journey and some of us may be little too busy or preoccupied. But you and I, all of us, we **are** all in this together. We are a caravan, called to BE an epiphany, to be a manifestation of God's presence, a shining light to others. People should see the light within us and say, "See those people at St. Bridget? See how they love one another, how they enjoy each other, how they work together, celebrate together, comfort one another when someone is sick or grieving? Look at how they serve those in need, how generous they are, how they work for justice and peace. You can really see their faith. I want to live like they do. I want to know that light."

Believe that about yourselves; I do! I've told you that before. I believe those things about this community, this caravan. And I know that if we all came to believe and trust in those things, there is very little that God would not enable us to do.

Have a Blessed Little Christmas.

Deacon Denny Duffell