

The Inclusive Community

Epiphany Sunday

January 3, 2010

Matthew 2:1-12

Theme: Journey

Homily of Anthony T. Padovano

Today's Gospel reading, surely one of my favorites, underscores for me five important lessons. I would like to share these with you.

1. The importance of never being fully settled

Let us take this story in its own terms.

The magi (root of our word "magic") were fascinated with stars. They were astrologers or astronomers, studying the stars, not only because of their intrinsic beauty but because they linked the stars with discovering the meaning of their lives. They believed the stars had a message. They were right about that in ways they never realized. We are, we know now, all alive because we are the creatures and products of the star dust and stellar energy of the universe.

These magi were not settled in life but curious. They were seekers. They never took for granted the beauty of creation. Ralph Waldo Emerson, the 19th century American writer, once observed that if the stars were visible only once in a millennium we would behold them with breathless wonder on that one night. He adds that the miracle of the stars no longer enchants us as it should because we are given the miracle so often.

When you and I lose our curiosity and our wonder, then we know our spirit has died. The magi never stopped seeking because, literally, every day brings a new miracle for all those who see and for all the star gazers of the world. The reason why so many missed the Christmas Christ and the Easter ministry of Jesus was because they stopped looking for miracles and, consequently, found none.

2. The insecurity of absolute power.

We sometimes imagine that if we had more control over our lives, more power, more influence, more money, more important connections that we would be happy and free. This illusion never ceases to tempt us and taunt us. It is false in every way.

Herod had absolute power in Israel, the whole Roman Empire behind him, friendship with the Emperor, Caesar Augustus, palaces and servants and immense wealth. In today's Gospel, he is riddled with fear, threatened by a baby, deceptive, manipulative, ready to murder, impatient with what he cannot control. It is a pathetic, sad story. He killed some of his sons and his wife, the only woman he ever loved, because he feared they were plotting against him. His friend Caesar Augustus, the Emperor, observed that a pig was safer around Herod than his own children because Herod knew the pigs could not plot against him.

Absolute power does not bring absolute control or tranquility but absolute fear and absolute insecurity. We need to learn this lesson. Clerical systems and infallible leaders bring misery with them, not peace or freedom.

3. Bethlehem was not impressive

I remember as a newly-ordained priest celebrating Mass at the place designated as the original manger. It was a star-filled early morning liturgy and the beauty of this simple town is still vivid in my memory

But Bethlehem, before Christ, was a place of little significance. David was born there but Jerusalem is where he came to greatness.

Bethlehem was indeed a "least important" place in Israel, a marginal village, a place for shepherds and sheep. Jerusalem had the Temple and the priesthood and the king. Bethlehem was where one stopped to get a break on the way to Jerusalem, not a place that one intended to visit.

Bethlehem is a symbol for me of all the events in our lives that we think are insignificant, all the experiences we dismiss as unimportant, all the people we assume do not matter. There is nothing insignificant in life – nothing. Children and poets and real saints know this. They have vision, not illusion. Think of someone you loved very much, who is now deceased. Just think of how significant it would be if you could hear their voice one more time, see their face, have them call you by name. All of which we once thought was insignificant.

Bethlehem reminds us that happiness belongs to those who rejoice in the insignificant: a child in a manger, a poor woman from Nazareth, a shepherd at the Inn, a knock on the door from a stranger from the East, a carpenter trying to make things comfortable for a family he cannot protect from discomfort. Every breath, every heart-beat, every word is a miracle.

4. The magi took a different road home

They could not go back to where they once were after they had seen Christ. The real star of Bethlehem was not in the cosmos but in the crib. The real light of the universe was not in the brilliance and the glory of a distant star but in the heart and the breath and the body and the smile of a child who could not yet speak or think or walk.

After what the magi saw in Bethlehem, after they beheld something more precious than gold and incense and myrrh, they could not find home by taking the same road they once travelled.

Think of the different roads we took back to our own hearts after we met someone we loved desperately, after we held our children in our arms, after we found a life-long friend. The road back to our hearts was forever different after that. The way home now would be on less-travelled roads.

5. The whole world is ready for Christ, more ready than those in institutional religious systems realize.

Matthew tells us that all Jerusalem missed Christ and even tried to destroy him.

When Napoleon brought Pope Pius VII to Paris in 1804 for his coronation as emperor and later arrested him, Napoleon demanded the agreement of the Pope with all Napoleon was trying to do with Europe. When Pius demurred, Napoleon said he would destroy the Church. Pius responded with one of the great lines in all papal history, "You cannot destroy the church. The clergy has tried for centuries and could not do it."

The world at large, all the Gentile magi of the human family, all the world religions, all those who are not institutional church administrators, know who Christ is better than those who administer the church. They know that most of what church administrators say about following Christ is unimportant. Christ does not care about birth control or church documents, about the gender of people who truly love each other, about which religion finds itself indispensable for salvation or for God's love to reach the world, about what the Pope thinks or which Protestant church does the Reformation better, about whether the Bible belongs to a privileged few or whether the modern world is a danger for our spiritual development. The true message of the birth of Christ is inclusivity. Matthew tells us the Gentiles were included; Luke tells us the poor, the shepherds, were included.

The world at large knows that Christ is another name for compassion, that God forgives everyone, that the true believers of the world are those who heal the sick, feed the hungry, shelter the homeless, and take in every orphan child on the planet.

There is not one road only to Christ or to God. Not for those who have seen the star of Bethlehem. God is on every road we take and home is everywhere and Christ is the companion at our side and every child is another sign of God's love and every heart beat of

ours is precious to God and all the breaths we take are filled with grace and glory. The gold and incense and perfume of the magi are meant for all of us. The star is your own life. Do not miss it or fail to see it.