

THE EPIPHANY — A STORY OF HOPE

This Sunday is the celebration of the coming of the Three Kings, the Magi, to find the newborn king. It is a story which is familiar to most Christians and is perhaps more celebrated in the Eastern Religions than in the West, and in the East this is the traditional day on which to give gifts. Many Biblical Scholars have doubts about the actual facts of the story, but they all agree on the importance of the theological message it contains, which is the firm belief that Christ came for all people, not just for the chosen race of the Jewish nation. The story, as told in the Gospel of Matthew, is his way of revealing the true nature of the mission of Christ which was somehow revealed to him in a special way. This is not a new way God acts in scripture. The book of Jonah is an example. The Jewish people had begun to believe that salvation was for Jews only and no one else. God revealed the opposite to some one of faith and revealed to him that he was to present this teaching to the Jewish people. This individual chose to reveal God's message through a story of Jonah and the whale which made it perfectly clear that salvation was for everyone, even the worst enemies of the Jews. Mission Accomplished! And there are the two apocalyptic books of Daniel and the apocalypse (Revelation) written to help strengthen the people in their faith during persecution, but written about the present using the future tense. God has many ways of getting his message across.

The basic message of this story is that Salvation is for all peoples. It also tells us via the gifts given to Jesus by the three kings that the tiny newborn baby is a king (the gift of gold) and is God (Frankincense) and that he will give his life to atone for the sin of Adam and for the salvation of all mankind (myrrh, a perfume used to anoint the dead). In a most beautiful story, the theological message of God's salvation for mankind is summed up in such a way that not just theologians can understand it but that all who read it can see the true depth of God's love and his divine providence for the human race. The remainder of Matthew's Gospel then gives us the account of how Christ in person lived and carried out his mission to the last drop of his blood. But it did not stop there for one can never omit the resurrection, the proof that everything Christ said and did was of divine origin and that he was truly our God, made visible by his taking on a human nature.

Besides strengthening our faith, this story also is one which should strengthen our hope and trust in the Lord. We live today in very uncertain times, something not seen since the great depression of the 1930's, some seventy to eighty years ago (ancient history?) Since those days, there has been very little if any total peace in the world. Everyone wants it but no one knows how to achieve it. Then out of the blue so it seemed, the economy and all that depends on it, suddenly began to collapse and fall apart while all the pundits stood and watched, wringing their hands! What to do? What to do? There were no answers. The government stepped in with many plans, most costing more than the country could afford. And then there was the cacophonous roar of doomsayers, pessimists, and a host of persons who had given up all hope. All this led to a host of accusations aimed mostly at no one in particular yet somehow giving a feeling that someone had to be blamed. Meanwhile the citizenry began to feel the pain as their IRA's, pension plans, retirement funds etc. began to disappear. Despair was in the air. Yet somehow there seemed to be light at the end of the tunnel, but it was all very, very dim. For many, that fundamental mark of humans by which they refuse to give up began to emerge. With sheer determination, many refused to give up and the true human spirit began

to show itself. People began to ban together and began to help one another in countless different and ingenious ways, physical, mental, loving, caring, and perhaps last, beginning to turn to God. All of this taken together began to give some glimmer of hope. Just maybe it will all get better!

Turning to God! For many it was a most natural thing to do; for others it was something quite novel. Yet there is something in each human that ever so gently pushes them to begin to take God and their faith seriously. But there were also those who simply dismissed such an idea outright. When it comes to faith and religion everyone acts somewhat differently, some seeing a type of magic, others seeing perhaps a show of weakness, some just denying it all, others defiant and some taking it all to be the most natural thing in the world. Faith is a very personal trait, a very personal interaction with one's God. With many, there is always a feeling that they use God more as a crutch which they somehow know is wrong, yet they feel they do need him. And then there are those few who truly see their God as a friend and as one who loves them and will do anything for them. These persons may seem to be rare, but once one knows them one senses they have everything that counts completely together in their lives. They are always happy and joyous persons, even in the midst of everything falling apart around them. They exude a confidence.

That is where this feast of the Epiphany comes into play and can help one put it all together. But for this to happen one must pause for a bit to think about the story, mull over the meaning of the gifts, see all the persons involved, including the family of Mary, Joseph and Jesus and above all God our Creator, Redeemer and Savior. In a word, one must pray about all this. Just to think about the whole story is itself a real prayer. Out of this will come the beginning or a deepening of one's relationship with their Lord, God, and Savior. There will be a deeper understanding and conviction that God is there to help them while at the same time a love relationship grows. In a word, God becomes more real in one's life and with a little practice, one begins to see his hand in their lives in more ways than they could ever have imagined. Without snooping, or prying, God is simply one's best friend, not just their Lord and Judge.

Once this happens, then one's life will forever be changed into one which has a real joy present, joy which can coexist with sorrow and trouble and can in fact help one cope ever so much more with the crazy world around them. In time, the trust one has in their God grows and soon they realize that no matter what the world may throw at them they will survive, and survive well, though it will almost always never be in the way they expected. With this comes a genuine feeling of peace. All this takes a bit of prayer, just talking with God in one's own words and if at all possible, praying with one's spouse and with one's family. It is amazing what happens in a marriage and in a family. For one thing, having the children pray along with their parents does make them feel that they are in fact helping. Will everyone talk about how they feel during all this? Most likely not! There are some things one finds very difficult to talk about. Yet at the same time, one's actions and one's outlook will speak volumes.

All this is contained in the story of the Magi. Listen note their actions. Note, too, the actions and feelings of Mary and Joseph; imagine what they must have thought and said. This deepens one's faith and above all, one's love for each other and for God. It also helps one to begin to feel God's care and love for them. Our faith is real. God is real. Enjoy!!!

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