

Epiphany

6 January 2019

What is the Epiphany?

These days rather than look something up or ask someone we “Google” it. And if we were to do so we would find several definitions. The first would be “the manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles as represented by the Magi as recorded in Matthew 2:1-12.” One of the others would be “a moment of sudden revelation or insight.” The first was part of our Gospel reading this morning so let us begin with it.

What did it mean to those living in those earlier times? Indeed what was it like to be living in those days?

That’s a difficult question of any people at any time. How would we describe the times we are living in now? Could we even describe it in any way that would be meaningful to someone living at another time or would we even be able to agree on any words with each other?

One writer and Bible scholar who has made an effort to describe life in the times of the New Testament is Luke Timothy Johnson. From his description of those times: Life was characterized by “Rootlessness and resentment, the loss of a personal sense of worth, the lack of community; the sense of passivity before...impersonal forces....Magic and astrology were enormously popular...they offered a direct control, or at least foreknowledge, of the future...The religious spiritin the early Roman Empire was one hungry for revelation, for transformation, and for a personal allegiance that would give a sense of identity in an alienating world.” [The Writings of the New Testament – Luke T. Johnson]

So we hear the story. The words are familiar to us. We’ve heard them read many times over the years – we even can recite the words of much of the old Christmas hymn, “We three kings of Orient are...” Yet who were they? Why were they going where they did? What were they looking for?

The Magi, the Wise Men, were not Jews – they were probably astrologers. Johnson tells us these were times when magic and astrology were popular. Our reading tells us they were from the East and they were not familiar with the writings of what we call the Old Testament. So they are in Jerusalem seeking help, direction as to where the Messiah is to be born.

They are directed to Bethlehem – “Bethlehem of Judea for so it has been written by the prophet.” And now they are in Bethlehem. And once there they come to a place where they know that this is it. Our reading is spare in words and details: it tells us only, they set out; and there ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over

the place where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy.

I don't know how a star could stop over a place but we do know that they knew, they knew – and were overwhelmed with joy.

And knowing that this was the place they entered the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother...and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

There are times in life that we just know – we just know – more than something we read in a book, or learn in a class, or hear somebody say – we just know that something is right, is true, “This is it! “ I can stake my life on it.

But what is it?

I read something by the writer Joseph Bottum that talks about this season, this time of year:

“I've always thought depressed people understand [this season] best. Oh, by all psychological accounts, the season only makes them more depressed, more vulnerable, more prone to misery. But why wouldn't it? For the happy and well-content, everyone out on the other end of the satisfaction spectrum, [this season] may not matter much; just a dollop, a drizzle of sweet frosting, on the wonders of winter. For the disheartened [this season] looms much larger: the inverse of all they lack. [This season] appears to them as what it is – an image of optimism and hope. A picture of a cosmos capable of love....”

“A sense of the world as moving toward a goal, a picture of humanity as changing in history, begins with the gradual absorbing into the human psyche of the idea that history is meaningful.... And that idea spreads into the world from the belief that God has entered history. At the highest metaphysical level, the divine cares about the temporal order. At the furthest reaches of being, the supernatural is concerned with the natural.”

“As a culture these days, we may lack a clear vision of where that progress is going or even what makes it progress. But the key is that time matters. And that came to us from [this season....] there is a light in darkness, a fire in winter....”

When I began I mentioned a second definition of “epiphany” – “a moment of sudden revelation or insight.”

In our e-mail magazine “The Evangelist” Fr. Carey thanked all of those who had a part of our recent Christmas Eve services. They were truly marvelous and a blessing.

And as happens at such times different parts moved those of us who were there in different ways.

In the bleak mid-winter

Frosty wind made moan

Earth stood hard as iron,

Water like a stone;

Snow had fallen, snow on snow,

In the bleak mid-winter

Long ago.

Our God, heaven cannot hold Him,

Nor earth sustain,

Heaven and earth shall flee away

When He comes to reign;

In the bleak mid-winter

A stable-place suffice

The Lord God Almighty –

Jesus Christ

Enough for Him, whom Cherubim

Worship night and day,

A breastful of milk

And a mangerful of hay;

Enough for Him, whom Angels

Fall down before,

**The ox and ass and camel
Which adore.**

**Angels and Archangels
May have gathered there,
Cherubim and seraphim
Thronged the air;
But only His Mother
In her maiden bliss
Worshiped the Beloved
With a kiss.**

**What can I give Him,
Poor as I am? –
If I were a Shepherd
I would bring a lamb;
If I were a Wise Man
I would do my part, -
Yet what can I give Him? –
I can give Him my heart.**

Amen. Richard Robertson

Sources: Luke T. Johnson, The Writings of the New Testament, An Interpretation

Joseph Bottum, Beyond the Bleak Midwinter, The Weekly Standard, December 24, 2018

Christina Rossetti, In the Bleak Midwinter, Scribner's Monthly, January 1872