

The Epiphany of the Lord, year B – January 8, 2012

Garrison Keillor, the writer and humorist of Lake Wobegone fame, tells a story about today's feast of the Epiphany. He said the first of the Wisemen racked his brains and could think of nothing to bring as a gift so he figured well, gold is always useful and that would be money in the pocket for the Holy Family and they could buy whatever they needed. The second Wiseman couldn't come up with any good gift ideas so he brought incense, for he reckoned with the odor in the stable, well the incense might help ease the situation a little. The third Wiseman was a woman and being down to earth and of a practical turn of mind, brought a covered dish, probably a tuna casserole and the word for that back then was 'myrrh.'

The word 'epiphany' means essentially showing up personally...showing up in the flesh. This was customarily done when a king visited various parts of his kingdom. It meant that, yes there was an actual ruler hanging around and it was a chance for him to see how each province is doing financially and certainly also an assessment of how much tax could be gathered from it. I suppose you could think of the bishop in the same way visiting the various parishes in his diocese so that we actually see him and he sees us and know that the diocese is not governed by some non-existing faceless bureaucrat. I can tell you right now that the next epiphany of the bishop in Our Lady of Grace parish is June 3rd.

But who were these Magi? Our present Pope has a reflection on it that is worth listening to. "They were the first Gentiles to find the pathway to Christ. What kind of people were they? The experts tell us that they belonged to the great astronomical tradition that had developed in Mesopotamia over the centuries. But this information of itself is not enough. No doubt there were many astronomers in ancient Babylon, but only these few set off to follow the star that they recognized as the star of the promise, pointing them along the path towards the true King and Savior. They were, as we might say, men of science, but not simply in the sense that they were searching for a wide range of knowledge: they wanted something more. They wanted to understand what being human is all about. They had doubtless heard of the prophecy of the Gentile prophet Balaam: *"A star shall come forth out of Jacob and a scepter shall rise out of Israel"* (Num24:17). They explored this promise. They were men with restless hearts, not satisfied with the superficial and the ordinary. They were men in search of the promise, in search of God. And they were watchful men, capable of reading God's signs, his soft and penetrating language. But they were also courageous, yet humble: we can imagine them having to endure a certain amount of mockery for setting off to find the King

of the Jews, at the cost of so much effort. For them it mattered little what this or that person, what even influential and clever people thought and said about them. For them it was a question of truth itself, not human opinion. Hence they took upon themselves the sacrifices and the effort of a long and uncertain journey. Their humble courage was what enabled them to bend down before the child of poor people and to recognize in him the promised King, the one they had set out, on both their outward and their inward journey, to seek and to know.”

What about this ‘restless heart’ thing the pope talks about? It’s of course the well known quote from Augustine that nothing satisfies us but God himself and so we must have this hunger for God. Do you and I have it? Yes, we do but it’s often buried in us by the pleasures, the beauties, the cares and anxieties of life. So we have to unearth it a bit and the only way to do that is by prayer...as St Paul said, ‘unceasing prayer.’ ‘Unceasing prayer’ says our Pope explains ‘means: never losing contact with God, letting ourselves be constantly touched by him in the depths of our hearts and, in this way, being penetrated by his light. Only someone who actually knows God can lead others to God. Only someone who leads people to God leads them along the path of life.’

And that’s the point of this feast for us. How does Jesus Christ appear in the flesh today? Through you and through me...we are the ones who make him present...by our love, by our truthfulness, by our courage, by our humility, by our prayerfulness. Only then can Christ shine through us. Yes, we still remain, fragile and weak, and selfish and sinful and all sorts of other things but if we are sincerely trying to imitate Jesus, we are gradually being transformed not into perfection but into holiness. So as the letter to the Hebrews says: *keep our eyes fixed on Jesus, the leader and perfecter of our faith.*