

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” EPIPHANY OF THE LORD (C)

Isaiah 60: 1-6 Ephesians 3: 2-3a, 5-6 Matthew 2: 1-12

By Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

After first enquiring at the court of Herod about “the newborn king of the Jews”, the magi go to a quite ordinary place to find Jesus. They do homage to a child born in obscurity whose significance is missed by the powers that rule. Later in his life, he is so much a part of the everyday of his contemporaries’ lives that the people of his own town will ask with incredulity, “Where did this man get such wisdom and miraculous powers? Isn’t this the carpenter’s son?” (Mt. 13 54-55) How could the ordinary be the place where anything special is happening? How could God be acting in our own place and in our own time? This feast is a feast of light and recognition. Who will point out the divine to me this day? Who has been that person for me in the past, the one who helped me to penetrate the ordinary to see God in my life? The feast bids us look a little more closely to who and what are around us and see in them the presence of God.

I am reminded of a favorite play, “Our Town”, the 1939 Pulitzer Prize winner by Thornton Wilder. In the preface to a collection of his plays (3PLAYS: OUR TOWN, THE SKIN OF OUR TEETH AND THE MATCHMAKER. New York: Harper Row, 1957), Wilder speaks of the power of art to awaken us to what is real. I think what he is saying about works of art can also be said of the scriptures. They too help us see what is true and real in our lives. Here is Wilder:

The response we make when we “believe” a work of the imagination is that of saying: “This is the way things are. I have always known it without being fully aware that I knew it. Now in the presence of this play or novel or poem (or picture or piece of music) I know that I know it”

So, Wilder, in “Our Town” is trying to show us: This is the way things are....really are. Remember the play? In the first two acts it shows us life in Grover’s Corners, New Hampshire. There seems to be nothing special about everyday life there. Such a simple town, such an ordinary time. Such ordinary characters. In the last act, the stage manager, who narrates the play, takes us to the cemetery. There Emily, a young mother we have watched grow into womanhood, has just been buried after dying in child birth. In the cemetery are other dead souls waiting, we are told, to go to the next life. But first they have to forget and let go

of this one. Emily wants to go back “for a moment” to her former life. One of the dead, Mrs. Gibbs, her mother-in-law, tells her she can, but she had better choose to go back, not to any special day, but to an ordinary day. “...choose an unimportant day. Choose the least important day in your life. It will be important enough.” The implication is that since everyday is so special and that we miss the significance of each day, if she were to pick a special day, its significance would overwhelm her. So, Emily chooses to return to her 12th. birthday. When she is there she says, “I can’t look at everything hard enough.” A light is beginning to shine for her and she is seeing what she and we miss so often--- just how special each day is.

It’s as if Emily is speaking to us and inviting us to celebrate this feast of the Epiphany. She looks at a day in her life and with growing awareness encourages, “Let’s look at one another....It goes so fast. We don’t have time to look at one another....I didn’t realize. So all that was going on and we never noticed.” When Emily has to return to the cemetery she says goodbye to everyday things, “Oh earth, you’re too wonderful for anybody to realize you.” She asks the stage manager, “Do any human beings ever realize life while they live it? – every, every minute?” And the stage manager responds, “No. The saints and poets, maybe—they do some.” One of the other dead adds vehemently, “Yes, now you know. Now you know. That’s what it was to be alive. To move about in a cloud of ignorance; to go up and down trampling on the feelings of those...of those about you. To spend and waste time as though you had a million years. To be always at the mercy of one self-centered passion or another. Now you know—that’s the happy existence you wanted to go back to. Ignorance and blindness.”

But it doesn’t have to be that way for us--- ignorance and blindness. This feast of recognition calls us to see the presence of the Holy One in our everyday—especially in the unexpected and unplanned. And to discern the significance of that Presence for our lives and what changes we have to make in response. We have celebrated the birth of Christ at Christmas and during the subsequent days. This feast offers a chance to reflect on just who it is who has come among us and where he is to be found. Are we, like the magi, willing to leave the comfort of home to go looking? Are we willing to put aside our accustomed religious thoughts and see him in the least likely places—there with us when we feel lost or unimportant; there among the disreputable and the wayward; there in the events that upset our equilibrium and cause us to ask questions that we once thought we

knew the answers for; there in what calls us out of our usual patterns and expectations? Are we willing to be magi and make the journey in search of the new life God is offering us?

We don't want to sentimentalize this feast, for suffering is associated with the One for whom the magi are searching. Their own return journey seems to be under the dark shadow of Herod's inquiry. They pick up the signs, they know he has evil in his heart for the child. The magi know enough to avoid seeing Herod again. Their suspicions prove correct for soon the baby boys will be slaughtered in Herod's quest to rid the world of a potential king and rival. We too must be willing to suffer for our belief in him. And any one who searches for Christ must hear him say what he does to his followers, "If you want to come after me, you must deny your very self, take up your cross and begin to follow in my footsteps." (Mt. 16: 24)

One of the gifts of the magi given to Jesus is a portend. Myrrh was used to anoint dead bodies and so hints of his future death. Indeed, this search by the magi and their inquiry of Herod begin events that will lead to Jesus' death and resurrection--- the great epiphany that ends this Gospel. Throughout history honest enquirers will come looking for him and in accepting him, will accept what we are already hearing at this stage of the Gospel. In the story of Jesus, from this beginning, there will be the shadow of the cross. The full epiphany of Jesus reveals that what the searcher finds is the Paschal mystery--life comes to us through Jesus' death and resurrection.

Actually, the whole gospel is filled with epiphanies. Jesus, through his words and deeds, will be constantly revealing himself. The Gospel writers these Sundays will be for us like those sought out by Herod. The evangelists will provide us with guidance for how and where to discover Christ in our lives. We will tend to them, especially Luke, throughout this liturgical year to learn more about where this "king of the Jews" can be found.

Some Christian traditions have used the Epiphany season as a time for programs that emphasize missionary outreach. The magi come from other lands, the argument goes, and this is a sign of the church's mission to reach out to non-believers. There is a hint of paternalism in this missionary zeal. The magi are represented in nativity scenes as being of dark skin. From a European perspective,

people of color from other lands need to be reached and this feast seems to be the impetus for such an outreach. But this focus on “the others”, can easily miss the point that this is a feast for all of us who are looking for Christ in our daily lives; even those who claim to have found him. As we read the Gospels we also realize that there are many epiphanies of Christ for those who have eyes to see and the ears to hear him.

This may be a feast of searching and finding, but it is also a feast that urges us never to settle down into a comfortable faith. God is always new for the searcher, always ready to be found by those who respond to the inner hunger God has set in each of us. God has made us, like the magi, to be God-searchers and God-finders.

QUOTABLE:

Anthony Trollope, in his Victorian novel, *BARCHESTER TOWERS*. New York: Everyman's Library, 1992.

"There is, perhaps, no greater hardship at present inflicted on mankind in civilized and free countries than the necessity of listening to sermons. No one but a preaching clergyman has, in these realms, the power of compelling an audience to sit silently and be tormented. No one but a preaching clergyman can revel in platitudes, truisms and untruths, and yet receive, as his undisputed privilege, the same respectful demeanor as though words of impassioned eloquence, or persuasive logic, fell from his lips ... No one can rid himself of the preaching clergyman. He is the bore of the age, the old man whom we Sinbad cannot shake off, the nightmare that disturbs our Sunday's rest, the incubus that overloads our religion and makes God's service distasteful. We are not forced into church! No, but we desire more than that. We desire not to be forced to stay away. We desire, nay, we are resolute, to enjoy the comfort of public worship, but we desire also that we may do so without an amount of tedium which ordinary human nature cannot endure with patience; that we may be able to leave the house of God without that anxious longing for escape, which is the common consequence of common sermons" (Trollope, 1:51-52).

---Submitted by: Bob Morin, OMI

ANNOUNCEMENTS:

1. CD Available: "FIRST IMPRESSIONS: PREACHING REFLECTIONS ON LITURGICAL YEAR C" This compilation, from past "First Impressions," includes two reflections on almost all Sundays and major feasts for this liturgical year. For more information and to purchase go to: <http://judeop.ispraleigh.com/>

2. I get notes from people responding to these reflections. Sometimes they tell how they use "First Impressions" in their ministry and for personal use. Others respond to the reflections, make suggestions and additions. I think our readers would benefit from these additional thoughts. If you drop me a BRIEF note, I will be happy to add your thoughts and reflections to my own. (Judeop@Juno.com)

3. Our webpage address: <http://judeop.ispraleigh.com/>
(Where you will find "Preachers' Exchange," which includes "First Impressions" and "Homilias Dominicales," as well as articles, book reviews and quotes pertinent to preaching.)

4. "Homilias Dominicales"-- these Spanish reflections are written by three friars of the Southern Dominican Province, Leobardo Almazan, Juan Torres, OP , Wilmo Candanedo, OP and two Dominican sisters, Regina Mc Carthy, OP and Doris Regan, OP. Like "First Impressions", "Homilias Dominicales" are a preacher's early reflections on the upcoming Sunday readings and liturgy. So, if you or a friend would like to receive "Homilias Dominicales" drop a note to John Boll, O.P. at: Jboll@opsouth.org or jboll@preacherexchange.org

5. "First Impressions" is a service to preachers and those wishing to prepare for Sunday worship. It is sponsored by the Southern Dominican Province, U.S.A. If you would like "First Impressions" sent weekly to a friend, send a note to John Boll at the above Email address.

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Thank you.

Blessings on your preaching,

Jude Siciliano, O.P., Promoter of Preaching, Southern Dominican Province, USA

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