

Epiphany

St Martha's, Bethany Beach

Sunday, January 3, 2021

Isaiah 60:1-6

Psalm 72:1-7, 10-14

Ephesians 3:1-12

Matthew 2:1-12

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Happy New Year! I hope you all had a good Christmas. Let us take a moment to look back at the year that was, take a deep breath, and turn to welcome in the New Year. As we leave 2020 behind, I hope one day someone will gather up in a book all the different stories of those who were affected by Covid. Social historians will want to know what happened. It was like one of those storms which levels some homes and leaves others intact. Ultimately, it affected us all and continues to do so.

So, at the start of another New Year, where are we? If we look upwards, the stars are still in place - two weeks ago we even had a conjunction of the planets Jupiter and Saturn - obviously, they hadn't read the rules about social distancing - which created a kind of Christmas star for our Christmas season. I take that as a sign of hope. I want to focus on the positive. Despite the gloomy headlines, a lot of good has happened in the past twelve months. The storm has brought out the best in some people and that is always uplifting to witness. There is now a firm desire to get back on course, although that will take time.

Where are we now? We are traveling by faith. We are trusting God to get things right, and allowing ourselves to adapt and respond in such a way as to align our wills to God's will. What is God's will for us at this particular point in our journey? To be cautious, obviously, but not to let ourselves be overwhelmed by fear or to lose confidence. The good news is that God became incarnate in Jesus Christ, and he leads us to life in all its fullness. He is the spring from which flows the living water - he is the source of our hope.

We travel by faith. Our destination is Jesus Christ. The first people to undertake a journey of any length to see Christ, were the Magi. We believe they came from Persia, now modern day Iran, from where they followed the star they observed at its rising. It was long journey, across unfamiliar and potentially dangerous terrain. They brought gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. Gold, worthy for a king, a ruler, one with power and authority. Frankincense: an aromatic perfume that was sprinkled on animals sacrificed in the temple - an appropriate gift for a priest, as one who offers sacrifice. Lastly, Myrrh: used for embalming the bodies of the dead before burial, a foreshadowing of Jesus' own death.

The Magi pay the King *homage*. That is, they submit before him. They arrive at the destination which is *our* destination too. We read that, upon arrival, "they were overwhelmed with joy". Not simple happiness, or plain relief at having arrived, but they were *overwhelmed* with joy. Which probably took them all by surprise. They discovered there and then an unexpected emotional bond to the child in the manger.

"Overwhelmed with joy." I want you to think about that phrase for a moment. Does that describe your own encounter with Jesus? Our gospel this morning is about two things: one, it is about the visit of the Magi to the Holy Family. The second thing, is that it is about the effect that visit had on them. I want you to dig a little deeper into the text of our reading, because it has an important clue for us about the nature of our relationship to Jesus. The gospel

describe how their visit affected the Magi *emotionally*. Emotions aren't always recorded in our gospel readings so when they are we need to sit up and take notice.

I have to say that this is not a subject I usually mention. The reason being, is that one of the greatest mistakes new people of faith make is to become a Christian on the basis that it will make you feel good. You go to church to be uplifted, joyful, always happy, always on a high. I've met people like this. It's actually a joy to see the light of Christ shining through them. The problem is, there comes a point in their worshiping life where that initial euphoria begins to wane, and they start to question whether this is what they really wanted. Sometimes they end up leaving the church, because they are no longer experiencing those same feelings. Their faith is like the seed which falls on rocky ground, which is received with joy, but since it has no root, lasts only a short while.

For this reason, I don't usually ask people, how does your faith make you feel? I don't want them to get the wrong idea. Strictly speaking, the point of religion is not to make you feel good, but to connect you with a loving God. OK, that should make you feel good, but equally you could feel sorrow say, for your sins, or for having wasted your life in pursuit of the superficial and trivial.

Our faith is a long journey and it takes us over "field and fountain, moor and mountain." You may breathe the mountain-top air but that will mean little unless you have also walked in the valleys. The important thing is to stay the distance. The Magi traveled a long way to see Christ, and your own journey of faith will be long. There are times when hope is weak and spirits are low. It is a journey you will need to commit and re-commit to - which is what we often do at the start of a new year - we commit ourselves anew. Today, I want you to commit yourself anew to the star of hope which guides us.

And here's a final twist to the story. I pray you will arrive at your destination not once, but many times. If our destination is Christ, we will arrive and then find that our journey is not ended, but only beginning; we will find ourselves continuing on the journey, only to arrive again and again, each time meeting Christ anew. Because when we meet Christ he takes us by the hand and leads us further on. That is the paradox of our journey of faith. And as your faith gathers in strength so will your joy. In fact, there is every possibility that along the way you will be "overwhelmed with joy" because you will have found the thing that really matters - not the superficial, vain things of a world which is passing away but something which will endure for ever: life itself, incarnate in Jesus Christ.

This year I pray that there will be times on your own journey of faith when you will experience those feeling of joy as did the Magi. You will not find true happiness until you find it in Christ. May God bless you on your journey this year.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Father David Beresford