

Archbishop Lori's Homily: Feast of the Epiphany

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St. Ignatius, Baltimore

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By Archbishop William E. Lori

A few years ago, when I served as bishop of Bridgeport, Conn., I celebrated the Feast of the Epiphany in a large multi-cultural parish. St. Peter's on Colorado Avenue was predominately Spanish-speaking, with parishioners from Mexico as well as Central and South America. There were also parishioners from various countries in Africa as well as a small community of Iranian Christians.

For most of those parishioners, Epiphany was a bigger feast than Christmas and it was certainly celebrated with a lot of solemnity and joy. It always included a pageant depicting the arrival of the three kings and gifts were distributed to the children of the parish after Mass. The associate pastor at St. Peter's had a distinct aversion to incense. It's not that he was allergic, he just didn't like to use it. So I deliberately used lots and lots of incense and caught his eye. We both smiled; after all, incense was one of the gifts the magi offered Jesus.

Before me was the reality that many people had come to that church from afar. Almost everyone's native lands lay hundreds if not thousands of miles away. For many, if not most, the journey leading there had been perilous. At the very least, it meant pulling up stakes and leaving behind family and loved ones. And, no doubt, many of those parishioners, as well as their bishop, were making another kind of a journey, an inward spiritual journey, a journey towards God, a journey with its own attendant dangers and fears. In the end, all of us had come from a far country, attracted by the light of a star.

For the three kings who followed the star represent all of us and a humanity in search of truth and love. Scripture sees in the three kings the fulfillment of God's promise to extend his saving mercy to the ends of the earth, that is to say, to the Gentiles. Through Isaiah God said of Jerusalem and of the people of Israel: "Nations shall walk by your light and kings by your shining radiance." St. Paul in his letter to

the Ephesians tells us that, in Christ, the Gentiles are “coheirs” and “copartners” with God’s Chosen People in this promise of mercy. The magi represent the catholicity, the universality, of God’s promise of mercy.

Whether the magi were kings, astronomers or simply wisdom figures matters little. What matters is that they were open to the truth. What matters is that they searched for the truth with good hearts capable of going beyond their wants, fears, or desire for immediate gain. Such self-mastery is what makes them royal figures in the church’s tradition. In this too, we pray, the magi represent us. For, in Baptism we are called to be “royal figures” in both church and world. As we were anointed with Chrism after baptism, the church prays that we “may remain forever a member of Christ who is priest, prophet and king.” The church prays that we may be so shaped by the Gospel, that our lives of sacrificial love will be an offering truly acceptable to God, the Father.

Yes, the magi were attracted the light of a star. The star, however, was only a sign that guided their search. It led them to a stable and to a baby in a manger. Coming upon a child in anything but royal circumstances, they were not disappointed nor did they withhold their gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. For what they also found amid the austerity of the stable was faith, hope, love and joy. So it was that they encountered the mystery of Christ – the source of life, the life that is the light of the human race (John 1:4), “the true light which enlightens everyone” (John 1:9), the one who would say of himself, “I am the light of the world” (John 8:12).

Every Sunday Mass begins with what we call “a gathering hymn.” This is not just a catchy name that liturgists have given to the opening song but rather it represents a deep truth in our spiritual lives. For, we search for the light even as we are drawn to the light. We come to the church for Mass not because all the issues are settled and not because all those in leadership are *ne plus ultra* but because visible yet hidden in the ordinary life of the church is the same light, the same truth, the same love, that drew the magi from afar, that drew our ancestors from afar, a light, a truth, and a love that still has the capacity to attract sinners and skeptics together with a the great mass of suffering humanity. For in spite of all that burdens us, the prophecy of Zechariah has been fulfilled in our midst – “The dawn from on high shall break upon us. . .” (Luke 1:78).

Today let us rejoice in the light of Christ and resolve anew to live in the light. St. Paul in his letter to the Ephesians reminds us that once we lived in darkness but now

we live in the light, the light of Christ, a light that produces every kind of goodness, justice, and truth (See Eph. 5:3). He calls us to live a life transparent in its holiness and luminous in its love. This is why Jesus says to us, “You are the light of the world! A city set on a mountain cannot be hidden. Nor do they light a lamp and put it under a bushel basket. It is set on a lampstand where it gives light to all in the house. Just so, your light must shine before others that they may see your good deeds and glorify your heavenly Father” (Matthew 5: 14-16).

Think of it this way, dear friends: we are called to be like the star of Bethlehem. Pope St. Leo the Great speaks of the humble service the star rendered to Christ. It shone, not for its own sake, but rather to lead the way to the newborn Savior. So too we are called to shine, indeed, we are called to be a light brightly visible, not to proclaim ourselves but to proclaim Christ Jesus as Lord (see 2 Cor. 4:5). We are called to live in the light, to be children of light, and to proclaim the light. We do this by our care for the poor, by welcoming the stranger in our midst, by our generosity in time of need, by working for a just and peaceful society, by avoiding the works of darkness, and by being ready to give an account of hope to those who, like the three magi, are searching for the truth and love in their lives. As they journey toward Christ, Pope Francis urges you and me to accompany them, to listen to their questions and concerns, to offer encouragement, to invite, and by word and example, to open their minds and hearts to the living Word of God. In his exhortation, *The Joy of the Gospel* he writes, “an evangelizing community gets involved by word and deed in people’s lives; it bridges distances, it is willing to abase itself if necessary; and it embraces human life, touching the suffering flesh of Christ in others” (№ 24).

Dear friends, let us celebrate this feast with joy! May the light of Christ shine in us and through us that the world may believe! And may God bless us and keep us always in his love.

Read more from Archbishop Lori here.