

Epiphany
4 January 2009

One of the original issues of the 2008 presidential campaign concerned the image of the United States. Early on in the campaign the candidates spoke of how too many nations in the world hated the U.S. They also spoke of the mistrust that some of our allies have toward us. With the crisis in the economy and the Church's appropriate focus on how the candidates stood on abortion, the "image issue" fell by the wayside, but the image we project as a nation is an important issue – whether we like it or not. Our ability to help and protect people and to bring peace, even our safety as a nation, depends on the image the world has of us.

The word "epiphany" means "manifestation." Today's feast invites us to examine God's image – and the image presented to us in the magi and the infant lying in the manger. We must come to understand the image of God that we have been given, because how we model our lives depends on the image we have. If others know that we are a Christian, especially if they know we are Catholic, they will look at us and the way we live our lives to see who we believe God to be. We all know and experience this in our area – being such a minority – people's entire image of the Catholic Church is based on the image they have of US – Sacred Heart Parish.

Or, another example, when we hear the Arabic word for God, "Allah," one thought that most likely first comes to mind is of terrorists. We associate "Allah" with Islam, but especially with radical Islam. Few Western Christians realize that the word "Allah" is used by all religions in the Arab regions that claim to be descendants of Abraham: Muslims, Jews and Christians. Even Arab Catholics use the word "Allah" for God. Yet it remains that most Westerners, especially Americans, are fearful of those who worship "Allah."

But looking at today's readings, we are given a particular image of God – and who this child in the manger really is – all at the hands of the Magi who come from the "East." We don't know WHERE they are really from – just "from the East." From early on in Christian art, these Magi were depicted as three men – one coming from Europe, one from Asia and one from Africa – and through them, Jesus was always shown in their art as the "Light of all the Nations." Though Jesus was born in one, particular place, in one particular culture, in the confines one particular moment in history, Jesus was born to save ALL people and to lead EVERYONE into His Eternal Kingdom – into Heaven.

We are very fortunate, as the Catholic Church, to be the only TRULY universal Church. Our parish, a microcosm of the entire Church – is made up of many peoples of different nations and cultures. Yet, what joins us is our common faith in Jesus – the “Light of all the Nations.” In Jesus, we, different though we are, find a unity that is as deep as the unity found in the Trinity – the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

- ✂ As we gather each week to share in the Eucharist here in church, we are called to build up the spirit of community among ourselves – and among every person who professes this same faith in Christ.
- ✂ Often we come to Church and sit in the same pew every Sunday, in front of the same people, but we have not come to know them by name. This Sunday, might I encourage you, after Mass today, to introduce yourself to the people around you that you DON’T know – and maybe every week after that.
- ✂ We share a tremendous faith and are united in a mystery that can be a source of great strength and joy to us – but we need to know one another to live this community.
- ✂ As a community, we are meant to be a sign to those around us of the presence of a loving Christ – a community willing to draw different groups of our neighborhoods and community together, a community concerned with our weakest and most vulnerable and marginalized.
- ✂ All of us, the Magi teach us, no matter our culture or origin or nationality, are members – not of one country or even one particular community, but of God’s Kingdom.

The gifts the Magi bring to Christ show us, in image, who this child really is. They “opened their treasures...and offered Him gifts of gold and frankincense and myrrh.” They bring only the most precious gifts – only the best – because this Child is no ordinary child – he is God made flesh.

- ✂ They offer Him gold to proclaim His royalty and kingship.
- ✂ They offer him incense to adore His Godhead.
- ✂ They offer myrrh to acknowledge his mortality.
- ✂ The image the 3 Magi present to us tell us who this Child really is: He is God, he is the King of every heart who believes in Him, and He is our sacrifice – offered on the wood of the Cross (a Sacrifice re-presented to us every week in the Sacrifice of the Mass – and given to us to share and make us one every week when we receive Holy Communion).

But we see other images in today's feast: the response to Christ's appearance.

- ✍ The Magi, following the star, crossed half the known world to pay homage to this King. They were filled with joy and endured every hardship and difficulty in order to come to the lowly stable and present Him with their gifts.
- ✍ King Herod, on the other hand, trembled in fear – perhaps because this newborn King meant he would have to relinquish his control and turn it over to another.

Jesus, being born in this lowly manger, even before He can talk – teaches us a precious truth about ourselves – in our hearts there are two different responses to His coming: that of the Magi – to abandon ourselves and entrust everything to following Him – or that of Herod – to cower in fear and trembling that we'll have to relinquish control – and doing everything we can to KEEP that control.

This Child, Christ, the One born in the manger, enters our lives every single day! He comes to us in the voice of our conscience, in the teachings of His Church, in the designs of His Providence. Our daily task is to choose how we will respond – and that response is the image that we present to others of who Christ is.

“Oh, those Catholics – they can just do whatever they want and then go to Confession – they're hypocrites!” We've all heard that said of us around here, haven't we?

- ✍ Perhaps that's the image we proclaim with the way we live our lives!
- ✍ Perhaps our response to Christ is to refuse to submit to His Kingship – and decide that WE are the Kings (just like Adam & Eve in the garden – who decided that THEY wanted to “play God” by eating from the tree and decide for THEMSELVES what was right and wrong).
- ✍ Isn't this the basic struggle that we all have? To give up our control – and give ourselves over to God, the King – the Eternal Priest and Sacrifice...
- ✍ Every one of us, realizing the choice of responses that we have, is a potential Magi – and a potential Herod.

Can we become more like the Magi? Absolutely. Here's how: look honestly at our level of selfishness.

- ✍ Perhaps what we most need to do is to kneel before the Christ and lay that selfishness down in Confession – just as the Magi laid their gifts at the feet of the Baby, Jesus.

- ✍ How do you respond when YOUR plans and hopes are foiled? This is a good barometer of how selfish we are – if things are all about ME and MY way, perhaps we are too self-centered and need to turn out more – “reflecting on things in our hearts” and recognizing that God’s Plan is MUCH better than my own.
- ✍ Herod planned on ruling Judea without any opposition – when this “Christ Child – this new-born King of the Jews” shows up, he blows up and lashes out with violence, killing all the first born sons.
- ✍ When things don’t go MY way, do I react like that?

The Magi planned on following the star wherever it led (as we sang in the opening hymn). When they got to Jerusalem, the star disappeared – and their plans seemed ruined – their trek at an end. How did THEY react?

- ✍ Did they throw a tantrum, like Herod?
- ✍ No, they stayed calm and looked for another solution – they persevered in doing good – they didn’t let their apparent set-back totally crush their entire mission
- ✍ and, when the star re-appeared, they followed it until it came to rest “over the place where Jesus was.”
- ✍ Their mission accomplished – their pilgrimage ended – because, despite the obstacles and disappointments, they kept looking and, following the star, found their way through the darkness to the manger.

This is how Jesus wants US to react – not in anger like Herod – but with trust, like the Magi. Imagine the image of Christ we would present to our community (and the world!) if EVERY member of the Church responded like this...If every one of us placed our plans and our lives in God’s hands, and simply followed where He leads us!

Today, as we celebrate Epiphany, the Lord’s manifestation as God, King and Sacrifice, to all peoples and nations, perhaps we can pause to reflect on how WE manifest who Christ is in our own lives... Are we more like Herod? Or are we more like the Magi? Do we recognize that we are part of God’s Kingdom, along with every other believer – and reach out to help – or are our plans all caught up just in myself?

Image really is everything. Today, God is made manifest. Let's examine our lives and see how WE manifest God – see what image WE portray of who God is in my life – just a baby born in a manger, or my God and King of my life...