

Homily – Epiphany of the Lord

During the last week I have been frequently asked a question: “How was your Christmas?” One of my responses is: “So far, so good.” Because I have discovered that when many people say Christmas, they mean the Nativity of the Lord. But for us Catholics, the season of Christmas starts with the Nativity of the Lord and continues until the celebration of the Baptism of the Lord, which falls on January 8 this year.

During the Christmas season we have two sets of readings telling part of the whole Christmas story. The first one is the story of St Luke of the birth of the Messiah, and we all know because we all come and surround the crib each year and we see what a wonderful scene it is. The second gospel is the one we just read to you. It’s the gospel for the Epiphany, the magi coming to Bethlehem and bringing with them their gifts and paying homage to the Christ child.

It’s hard to comprehend but, at one time in the church, there were only two holy days of obligation, very special in the eyes of all the people. One of course was Easter, the Resurrection, and the other was not the Nativity of the Lord, the other was the feast that we celebrate today: the Feast of the Epiphany.

Why, you might ask. Well, because if you look at the crib and you see the birth of Jesus, he is surrounded by shepherds and his mother and St Joseph, and every character, even the angels probably, but every character in this scene is the welcoming of the Jewish Messiah. And it is today that all the gentiles of the world understand that Jesus came, not just for the people of Israel, but for the people everywhere. He was to be the Messiah, not only for a small group of people who held on to the hope of the Messiah for centuries and centuries, but he had come for us all.

And therefore the Epiphany is, rightly so to us who are gentiles, perhaps the happiest of days, because we have an opportunity to rejoice in the fact, not only that the Saviour, the child, is born, but especially because he is truly born to us, as the hymn goes. Jesus came for you. Jesus came for me!

The Epiphany means the manifestation of the Lord. And, of course, the reason it is so special in our liturgy is because before the Nativity of the Lord was the primary Christmas celebration, the Epiphany was the main feast that was celebrated. That strikes us as perhaps a little strange, because we think of the Birth of the Saviour as the central feast, which it has become. The central feast is celebrating the Incarnation and that, of course, is called Christmas.

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But if you give it a little thought, you can understand the church fathers. Because the church fathers were mostly men who saw not so much the birth as being important, but the manifestation that this child, the Son of God, was for all peoples, East and West.

It would be a good thing if we kept this in mind during these days.

Jesus, the Messiah, the Holy One of God, is given to all people, whether you believe in Him or not, whether you serve Him and pay homage to Him, whether you take Him into your heart or whether you ignore Him, or perhaps are yet to hear of the wonders of his salvation.

What is important today is the child comes for all of us.

And that teaches a great lesson about ourselves, especially when we live in a time of so many wars, especially when we think of our divisions, especially when we know how hard it is to love our members of our own family, never mind other races, or foreigners who have strange customs or beliefs.

The Magi are not strangers. They are not foreigners from the East. They are people who come to pay homage to the God that has given them the Prince of Peace.

And at this time, we make a special effort to try to break down the barriers that separate race and religion and creed and history, and bring us into tune with the great Epiphany at the time of Jesus the child.

And so today we also remember, in a special way, that the child who died on the cross, his last words were to John, saying, giving his own mother into the hands of John, "Son, behold your mother."

And for these reasons, for centuries, the feast of the Epiphany was the most important celebration of the church in welcoming the Christ child into our hearts.

God has made Himself manifest, taken on flesh, risen from the pain of the cross, into a new life, and as he said to his apostles, "I am with you now, with every human being, I am one with you, and the way you treat them is the way you treat me, for there is no Messiah unless you can find him in your sisters and your brothers."

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And that is a wonderful, wonderful gift to know that when we serve each other, when we reach out to each other, when we forgive each other, when we care for each other, we are indeed children of the Epiphany and we are promised everlasting life.

So let us keep celebrating Christmas, not only during this holy season, but every day, secure in the knowledge that Jesus came for all of us. Amen!