

Reflection for Sunday, January 2, 2022

Encounters with Mystery

How silently, how silently, the wondrous gift is given, so God imparts to human hearts the blessed gift of heaven.

May the blessings of the Christ Child—hope, peace, joy, love—be with you and your loved ones wherever they may be this day and throughout the new year'

Let us pray:

God of each new year, new day, new life: how glad are our hearts that we should gather at this new beginning! As ancient Wise Ones chose to heed the light you set before them, so, too, we heed the light that has come into our world. As their faithfulness hampered the violence of Herod, so, too, let our response set the world further on the path of peace. Receive this gift of worship we offer, and let it fill us with courage and hope for the year ahead. Amen.

Today is Epiphany Sunday. The word “epiphany” means “showing forth”. The symbol of Epiphany and the season which follows is light. Epiphany is the time when we learn to let holy love shine through our lives, so it shows forth as Christ-light in the world. We learn from the life and the ministry of Jesus how to share the love of God through prayerful service.

Wise Magi in search of a child whose star they have seen in the east and in whose honour they have come bearing gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. Some say the Magi were of the Zoroastrian faith which, like the Hebrew faith, was expectant of a messiah. They were also students of the stars, at a time when such study was an accepted way of discerning events. Their journey into other lands, apparently unprotected, put them at some risk, especially since they

carried precious gifts. The fact that they bore gifts, indicates the value they placed on what they hoped to find. This caravan of dignitaries brings an air of majesty and authenticity to the story of God's entry into creation through the birth of a child. But the whole point of their presence in the story might not be about lending authenticity to the object of their search. Maybe instead it's about the wonder of how they were found by God; about the sheer miracle of how we are all found by the epiphanies, the appearances of God, in our lives. If that is so, what does the story of the Magi say to us?

The magi's journey could be any of our own. We know about deserts and dry places and thirst, if not of the body, then of the soul and the heart. We know about looking into the stars and, in a thousand other places, searching for hope and love and meaning. We know about wanting to find someone who can be trusted to guide us on our journey. We know about dark places and the ruthlessness that can take hold of people when they are threatened and afraid. We know about being on the outside looking in, the times when we've been left out in the cold or when we were not included, and we know when we've done that to others. As Thomas Long observes: "Whenever people in any society expect wisdom from their leaders, but get only raw ambition and deceit; whenever people hope for justice from the law courts, but receive only indifference and partiality; whenever people cry out for food, but get only empty plates and hunger; whenever people yearn for truth, but receive only lies and empty promises; whenever we have heard the scream of the winds, howling through the trees; whenever we have listened fearfully to the churning of the floodwaters surging by during the long night: then we have come to one of those times when, as Isaiah aptly describes, 'we wait for light, and lo! there is darkness' (59:9)."

Mystery has always been a summons to pilgrimage where destination can be glimpsed but never fully known. It begins, perhaps, with a moment of awareness, a sudden reorientation of one's life, an epiphany. It is found in moments of such natural beauty that the only immediate response can be "don't just do something, stand there!" Other times, it's as if our blindness has been cured and we see miracles where before we saw nothing special at all. And then we journey, inwardly and outwardly, struggling to make sense of what we have seen.

"Everything," said Bishop Desmond Tutu, "begins in mystery and ends in politics." So the journey for the Magi ended intertwined with the politics of Herod. We are warned. Every experience of beauty, every sense of wonder, can set us on a journey to an unknown destination, far from familiar ways, complicating our lives and demanding of us skillful discernment of the politics of our day. This is the way of our faith.

If we invest our knowledge and resources in discerning the signs that point in directions of hope...If we are willing to follow these signs on a journey which from time to time will challenge our security...if, on the journey, we bear our gifts of love, joy, and generosity...then, as the Magi found in the Epiphany of Christ's birth, we will be found in epiphanies of truth, justice, and love that continue to mark God's presence in creation.

As wise ones sought the Christ by the light of a star, let us also risk the journey of compassion. This light is born not from a star but from a life. As Jesus said years later: "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life" (John 8:12). Wherever the Spirit is leading, know you are loved, and that God is with you, always close to home.

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