

**January 6, 2019 Homage to the Newborn King Homily:** In his justly acclaimed book, “The Birth of the Messiah”, the late Fr. Raymond Brown, a respected biblical scholar, tells an amusing story of a fellow scholar, who was a notorious skeptic regarding the historicity of many of the events recorded in the bible. He once claimed that Matthew’s narrative of the visit of the Magi was pious fiction. He boldly declared, “There were no wise men or kings”. Not surprisingly, many of the faithful were disturbed, and even scandalized, by the scholar’s casual dismissal of one of the key events revealed in the Gospel of Matthew. So one day the skeptical professor received a hand painted Christmas card depicting three angry Oriental kings in royal attire, accompanied by camels knocking at the door of the professor’s study, demanding by name to see him. One must not trifle with the Word of God!

The adoration of the Magi was a popular theme throughout the history of Christian art. The great painters of the past accepted, without the slightest reservation, the account of the Magi’s visit in Matthew’s second chapter. Leonardo DaVinci, Sandro Botticelli, and Fra Angelico are just a few of the great painters of the past who have depicted this splendid event on canvas. What is particularly striking about their work is the posture of the Magi (or kings) who have found the Christ child. These representatives of highly advanced cultures, aristocrats all, are depicted on their knees, and presenting gifts to Christ. First they sought, then they found and worshipped. “They prostrated themselves and did him homage.” (Mt.2:11)

Fast forward to today. Could we possibly imagine a chairman Kim of North Korea, a Castro of Cuba or one of the powerful leaders of Western Europe on their knees honoring the newborn King? Or what of a famous scientist such as the recently deceased Steven Hawking prostrating himself before Christ? Not likely!

It is interesting to note that the word “homage” appears no fewer than three times in this gospel reading (Mt.2:1-12) and ten other times in the rest of the gospel. The word means “Something done to show reverence, honor or respect to a person of dignity or authority.” Like any great drama a villain plays a key role in the narrative of the Evangelist: King Herod. He poses as a pious Jew, and pretends to want to adore the newborn King. His plea is cunning: “When you have found him, bring me word, so that I may go and give him homage”. (Mt.2:8) The news of Christ’s birth does not give rise to joy in Herod but to fear and rage. He sees the newborn king as an enemy, a future rival to his throne. In short, he is an imposter, a phony.

Although Herod is dead, his evil spirit is alive and well in the secular and anti-Christian cultures of East and West. Christians are persecuted for observing the feast as a Holy day; Christmas cribs have been vandalized and oftentimes removed from public squares, the setting up of the Christmas crèche can be a punishable crime, subject to stiff fines and even imprisonment. In addition, many of the lovely religious symbols of Christmas have been replaced by secular ones with no possible connection to the great mystery we Christians celebrate: the Eternal Word taking for Himself a human nature, otherwise known as the Incarnation.

In one of his meditations on the feast of the epiphany, the retired Pontiff, Benedict XVI asks if there is something of Herod in each one of us. “Are we sometimes blind to his signs and deaf to his words?”

At a time when fewer and fewer Catholics are availing themselves of the sacramental life of the church, we would profit immensely by reflecting on the following words: “...and on entering the house they saw the child with Mary his mother”. (Mt.2:11) The house in some sense represents the church. In order to find Christ, one has to enter the house, which is the church. If we cease passing through the doorway of the church, then what doors are we opening? Surely many of those doors do not open to Christ.

Let us open up our treasures to Christ. If we have a generous spirit, he will gladly receive all that we offer him, especially our good deeds done in the service of his holy name.

Amen!